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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 intensely masculine and misogynist in nature. Accordingly, 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 perceived 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 establish 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 representations 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. In this larger context, the present 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 included 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 the critics. 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/female in a world dictated by whites/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. 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) Thus, women had to unite against the persistent and well developed stereotypes, that rarely favoured women, to establish a visibility beyond the 'proper roles' assigned to 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 and thus initiated the long process of changes in social and political dynamics. Since race, class and gender are mutually constituted, it is not possible to understand them as discrete categories of analysis. The intersectional paradigm states that the actions of men and women are influenced by the structures of authority and power. In this sense, politics and gender are inter-related since political change can make available or curtail the possibility of change in society.

To understand this better, one has to study the beginning of the movement and its composition. The 1960s in America was the time when 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 them 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 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 for joining 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.

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. The writings of the Black Panther women were their attempt to remove themselves from the marginalized position to which the dominant society had relegated them.

Jennings in her essay *Why I Joined the Party: An Africana Womanist Reflection* 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 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, 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). This statement is an indicator of the nexus that exists between knowledge and power. The educational institutions are the constituent of the ideological state apparatus which the power blocs exploit to sustain conformism in the society and maintain their supremacy. The Eurocentric perspective ensured that every alternate world view remained on the margins and the ‘other’ never became the subject of any relevance. The education that the Panthers were provided, aided in empowering them with self-esteem which the African-American community desired and deserved. She writes in this regard:

...our teachers taught us so vigorously about our importance in the community that I started to care about learning and understanding our situation with an undrugged mind. Never having particularly enjoyed history as taught in school, my attitude completely changed in the party. The way Panther teachers taught us new recruits, I wanted to devour history books. They taught us from Afrocentric perspective, whereby the needs and interests of African people determined our perception of the world. (3)

To surmount the situation of oppression, it is very crucial for the subjects to critically recognize the cause of their exploitation. It is imperative to initiate a transforming action that would help them in the creation of a new situation which peruses a fuller humanity. Only the oppressed who has witnessed the dehumanizing nature of the oppressor can lead the struggle to rescue their stifled rights. But this aim is unachievable if the dehumanization grips the revolutionaries too and they begin oppressing the women. Jennings also admits that sexism was a harassment that the women faced at times in the party but they were helpless to a great extent because there was no other place in America where they could be their revolutionary self. She shares her predicament in the essay saying:

There were women who came through the party and would immediately leave because of the vulgar male behaviour. There were women in the party like me who tried to hold on because we understood the power, the significance, and the need for our organization. Black men, who had been too long without some form of power, lacked the background to understand and rework their double standard toward the female cadre. (7)

It is interesting to note that despite the misadventures she had with the men in the party, she chooses to look at the party holistically and 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. This was the time when the party considered a revision of their radical ideology and consequently began welcoming more women to the party so that the imbalance in the composition of the party could be evened out. Women were a significant number in the party and their marginalization to the kitchen and the desk work was weakening the true potential of the party. The colonial hegemonic mindset which had transpired among the blacks too in their relations to women had to be countered. To allow this, by 1968, women were discursively integrated into the organizational structure under mostly male leadership. Spencer rightly argues in this context that the Black Panther Party became a place where black men and women could collectively challenge patriarchy and reconceptualise gender roles.

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.

She also accepts that all men in the party could not be generalised as sexists. Many men supported her in her opposing of the dominant captain. Besides that, there were other threatening issues which demanded that the Panthers rise above petty issues. She discusses the time when the leaders of the party were rotating in and out of the prison and if the women were disrespected then the party was bound to fail.

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. There were Panthers who dedicated their lives to the good of the community and worked tirelessly and aggressively for the party. She decides to rise above the misbehaviour of some men in the party and pays a tribute to thousands of those workers who were ready to die for the people.

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. She opens the essay by revealing that the first image that the general public had got of the party was that of the resistance efforts of the male African – Americans. This allowed the people to presume that the women in the party were merely confined to the kitchens of the Panther offices. Thus the true place of women in the party seemed to be highly obscure. The Black power Era (1966-75) showed paucity of representation of the Black Panther women and their contribution towards the revolution. The essay is divided into parts which analyse the participation of women in various phases of the party. The early 1960s in America saw women working collectively to form female organizations for social service and political activism. In the opening of the essay, she mentions the popular assumption about the Black Panther Party that it was a primarily male organization and that the role of women was restricted to preparing breakfast for children and appearing in mass rallies. Their role in safeguarding the African American community mostly remained obscure. The women remained invisible from the narrative of the Panthers and that is why it became the need of the hour to examine and evaluate the female leadership in the party and provide them with their share of recognition. This essay studies the contribution of women in the Black Panther Party from 1966-82. During its first five years (1966-71), the party directed all its focus on self-defence which led to the increased interest of the federal law agencies in their activities. By 1971, the intra-organizational tensions mounted to such a great extent that the party had to shift its focus to community service programs. A thorough study of the years of origin to that of the closing of the final chapter of the party in Oakland in 1982 captures the full extent of the participation of women in the party. The essay is divided into sections which begin with the discussion on the revolutionary years of the party, moving further to the deradicalization, followed by the leadership of Elaine Brown and finally the activities undertaken by the women during the final phase 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. Tarika Lewis, the first female to officially join the party was treated just like other male members of the party and the same rules applied to her. In the beginning she faced bias at the hands of the male members, but

eventually, with her hard work, she was able to win their respect. Women in the party were given weapons training and political education classes just like all other recruits.

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 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)

As opposed to Kathleen Cleaver, the other women in the party had to encounter various forms of chauvinism. With the passage of time the female membership increased in the party and that Bobby Seale quoted in his autobiography *A Lonely Rage* that by the end of 1968, sixty percent of the Black Panther membership was represented by women. Women took over the writing and drawing for *The Black Panther* newspaper too and gradually the women started defining themselves through its pages. The party reached organizational flux when the party leader Huey P. Newton was arrested to be tried for voluntary manslaughter conviction in the case of the death of Officer John Frey. This was the time that women assumed the ranks which were unoccupied now because most of the Black Panther males were incarcerated with the help of the counter intelligence program launched by the FBI. Women like Kathleen Cleaver, Assata Shakur, Elaine Browne, Angela Davis took on the leadership roles and began directing the party.

After Huey P. Newton was convicted of murder of the police officer, John Frey, things started falling apart. The FBI infiltrated the party and most of the party leaders were either arrested or killed. The vacuum thus created had to be filled with the female members. This organizational flux allowed the women to attain leadership positions at local and national level. Various other cases of individual females are also discussed and none could deny the absence of gender bias. But what is noteworthy is that with time, the party realised that the chauvinism in the party hampered the effectiveness of the organization. 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 1960s which did not even consider gender inequality to be a concern. Hope for betterment was rekindled when Huey P. Newton was released from prison on 27 May, 1970 after the reversal of the conviction of voluntary manslaughter. Newton's views on gender equality left a positive impact on the party. After his release, Newton took up the task of refocusing the party of the community after it was distracted towards radicalism under the leadership of Elridge Cleaver. This strife in ideologies led to a factional split within the party in 1971. One faction favoured the guerrilla warfare advocated by Elridge Cleaver, while the other supported Huey P. Newton emphasis on community programs. This tension led to expulsion of many comrades and many were left in emotional turmoil. Many women also left the party due to the disaffection with the national leadership.

When Elaine Brown was appointed the Chairwoman of BPP in 1974, the female membership of the party increased. There was a clear increase in the influence of women in the party during the later years. The focus on elimination of gender bias increased and the rights of women for self-determination were emphasized upon. After Huey P. Newton returned to America from his exile, he stated that the women had kept the party on course and strengthened it too. He declared that the best leadership is that in which the responsibilities are shared equally by men and women.

After discussing the cases of these female members of the party, it can be concluded that the contributions of the women to the party were immense and the party was nurtured by the sweat and blood of men and women alike. This essay ensures that the commitments, sacrifices and dedication of the female Panthers are not forgotten.

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 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 chairman 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.

She also points out that race becomes prioritized over gender in nationalist struggles and women’s interests become trivialized in a struggle for racial justice. Consequently, experiences of Black women--who are located at the nexus of multiple axes of discrimination--are not adequately reflected in movements which focus on liberating ‘Blacks’. Feminism was not the most popular subject among black women who were active in revolutionary organizations because they used to associate feminism with middle class white women who could not understand the battles of the black women. They failed to recognize the profoundly masculinist emphasis of their own struggle and put themselves at risk. They often ended up affirming hierarchies in the realm of gender relations which they militarily challenged in the area of race relations. When this sexual harassment began taking the form of sexual coercion, women in the party began uniting to check the perpetuation of the traditional domestic gender roles. Thus, the process of establishing a gender neutral organization became a dynamic process and Roberta Alexander notes:

For the last several months in our party there have been struggles over this question (of gender equality). The struggles have gone through the whole gamut of possible real problems; have gone through women leadership; women being able to be armed, to defend themselves as well as the brothers; on whether or not the women do all the typing or whether or not they take part in the armed self-defence and the running of the offices, not just behind the type writers; and it goes down to the sexual levels, whether or not the women are supposed to do so for the cause of the revolution, etc. (7)

Despite the mixed experiences of women while being a Panther, 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 study of these essays by Panther women reveal the story of the Black Panther Party through the lens of their subjectivity and they manage to powerfully capture the ways in which women were perceived by the men in the party and how they perceived themselves. The two essays lay out the terrain of thoughts and experiences of black women who overcame numerous challenges to penetrate and survive in a male dominated territory. These

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 had 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. The personal frankness of the two essays reveals some of the myriad revolutionary practices which were conceived as quintessentially masculine. The experiences shared in the two essays familiarise the reader with the provocative and complicated times which these women lived through in the party. 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 the many evils like racism and sexism.

Thus, 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 contributed 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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