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An Intersectional Political Black Feminist Reading of Assata Shakur's Life and Legacy

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Abstract: Assata Shakur's life and legacy continue to inspire critical discourse on intersectionality and the complexities of Black feminism in the context of systemic oppression. Her experiences highlight the interconnected nature of race, gender, and class, making her a pivotal figure in understanding the broader implications of Black liberation struggles. Her story not only reflects the challenges faced by Black women but also underscores the need for solidarity in collective movements for liberation and social change. This paper employs an intersectional Political Black Feminist framework to analyse the life and enduring legacy of Assata Shakur. Positioning Shakur not only as a Black liberation icon but as a critical embodiment of interconnected systemic oppression, it argues that her experiences—including state persecution, imprisonment, reproductive injustice, and exile exemplify the core tenets of Political Black Feminism's analysis. Shakur's narrative is read as a transatlantic case study illuminating these dynamics: her targeting by COINTELPRO underscores the state's criminalisation of Black women revolutionaries; the forcible separation from her child exemplifies reproductive control as state violence; and her intellectual work articulates the inseparability of racial, gender, and class liberation. Shakur's legacy transcends individual biography, revealing how the intersectional praxis of Political Black Feminism provides essential tools for understanding resistance against interlocking systems of power. Her life underscores the necessity of autonomous struggle, solidarity across diasporic lines, and a relentless critique of the state, affirming that Black women's lived realities remain central to global liberation movements.

Keywords: Intersectionality; Black Feminism; Black Panther; Incarceration

Introduction

Kimberlé Crenshaw is a renowned academic and lawyer. She is also known for her writing on civil rights, critical race theory, Black feminist legal theory, and the intersection of race, racism, and the law. Adding to her position at Columbia Law School, she is a Distinguished Professor of Law at the University of California, Los Angeles. Crenshaw's work has been path-breaking in critical race theory and in "intersectionality," a term that she created to illustrate the double bind of concurrent racial and gender discrimination. Her studies, writing, and activism have identified key issues in the perpetuation of inequality, including the "school to prison pipeline", which means the policies and practices that push the nation's schoolchildren, particularly most at-risk children, out of classrooms and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. This pipeline reflects the prioritisation of incarceration over education. Through the Columbia Law School African American Policy Forum (AAPF), which she co-founded, Crenshaw co-authored with Andrea Ritchie *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women*, which documented and drew notice to the murder of Black women and girls by police. Crenshaw and AAPF subsequently launched the #SayHerName campaign to call attention to police violence against Black women and girls.

Assata Olugbala Shakur, born JoAnne Deborah Byron on July 16, 1947, is an American political activist best known for her involvement with the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army (BLA). She began to take an active part in the late 1960s, fueled by her contact with Black Nationalist organisations, and started to fight against racial injustice. Between 1971 and 1973, she was charged with numerous crimes and was the focus of a multi-state search. In May 1973, Shakur was detained after being injured in a shootout on the New Jersey Turnpike. She developed her interest in communism and started talking about the Vietnam War and its hidden facts with several African students attending Columbia University:

I continued saying the first thing that came into my head: that the U.S. was fighting communists because they wanted to take over everything. When someone asked me what communism was, I opened my mouth to answer, then realised I had no idea. My image of a communist came from a cartoon. It was a spy, dressed in a black trench coat and a black hat pulled down over his face, slinking around corners. I felt like a bona fide clown.I knew I did not know what the hell communism was, and yet I had been dead set against it.... I never forgot that day..... Only a fool lets somebody else tell him who his enemy is.

Black Feminism and Assata Shakur

The theory of Black Feminism emerged in the 1970s and 80s in Britain. Political Black Feminism remains an insightful and essential critique of mainstream feminism, anti-racist activism, and the state's framework. Born from the lived experiences of women of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent facing compounded racism, sexism, class abuse, and state violence, it forged a unique identity focused on a combined effort and a primary analysis of authority. This movement was intensely focused on state

oppression. Black Feminism finds a powerful transatlantic echo and embodiment in the life and politics of Assata Shakur, whose experiences and writings brightly demonstrate its central tenets. Her alliance with the Black Panther Party opens a new horizon for her in her political career. Together, they form an effective heritage for understanding intersectional resistance against interlocking systems of oppression.

No one is going to give you the education you need to overthrow them. Nobody is going to teach you your true history, teach you your true heroes, if they know that that knowledge will help set you free.

It is our duty to fight for our freedom.

It is our duty to win.

We must love and support one another.

We have nothing to lose but our chains.

At its core, Political Black Feminism redefined identity as a political mace. The term "Black" was intentionally included not only as a racial descriptor but as a unifying political identity encompassing African, Caribbean, and South Asian women subjected to British imperialism, colonialism, and institutional racism. This tactical harmony documented that their fight against white superiority, patriarchy, exploitative capitalism, and an unfriendly state was primarily interconnected. Assata Shakur's experience symbolises this understanding of the state as the shared enemy. Her framing by the FBI as the "soul" of the Black Liberation Army and the objective of one of the strongest manhunts in New Jersey history epitomises how Black women revolutionaries were criminalised and portrayed as existential threats by the state apparatus.

A significant feature of Political Black Feminism was its persistent focus on the state as a primary site of violence and control, testing racist immigration laws, police brutality, deaths in custody, and institutional discrimination. Assata Shakur's life itself has become vicious evidence of this state violence. Her capture in 1973, marked by severe police brutality, her controversial examination, and her following imprisonment under a raucous environment, culminating in her escape and ongoing exile, stands as stark, personal evidence of the state's willingness to utilise excessive violence to suppress Black dissent. Her case exemplifies the "criminalisation of Black communities" that British groups like Southall Black Sisters (SBS) fought against, demonstrating how the state constructs narratives of Black threat to justify repression.

Assata Shakur's experience directly intersects with this struggle. While incarcerated, she was forcibly alienated from her infant daughter, Kakuya, a profound act of state violence against the Black family and maternal bond. This division mirrored the family destruction caused by racist immigration policies in Britain. It represented the state's power over Black women's bodies and reproductive lives, a core concern of Political Black Feminist analysis. Political Black Feminists pioneered grassroots independent organising for developing theory, building community, and launching campaigns. Assata Shakur, although operating within the Black Panther Party and later the Black Liberation Army, represented the need for Black women to maintain their revolutionary organisation, often demanding that sexism within liberation movements

be addressed. Her scholarly offerings, particularly through her autobiography *Assata: An Autobiography*, serve as a powerful form of autonomous knowledge production and resistance narrative. Her voice, from exile, continues to inspire autonomous resistance globally. The legacy of Political Black Feminism, expanded by figures like Assata Shakur, is vast and enduring. Shakur's life as a fugitive, living under a political haven in Cuba while still targeted by the FBI, underscores the global reach and persistence of state repression analysed by the British movement. Their collective analysis of the state inextricably links Political Black Feminism and the revolutionary activism of Assata Shakur as a primary engine of violence against Black women and communities.

Application of Intersectionality

"If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free", not because only Black women need freedom, but because their freedom would eradicate every system of supremacy. Black women are the one who suffers the most when it comes to any course of life. Earlier, they were dominated by men in the house; however, they eventually gained equal rights in the home. Now it is time for them to flourish worldwide. The government authority is also doing the same thing for black women, such as denying their fundamental rights and justice. Crenshaw's intersectionality provides a specs through which Shakur's biography becomes not a series of isolated injustices, but a multi-dimensional representation. The state besieged her not simply for her disobedience of police, but for her gendered self-possession within Black power politics; as a woman in the Black Liberation Army fight; as a jailhouse radical; as a fugitive; and ultimately as a symbolic emblem often vilified by both racist and sexist cultural norms.

As a senior member of the Black Panther Party and later the Black Liberation Army, Shakur became a notable mark of the FBI's COINTELPRO program, an illegal movement to dismantle Black Power organisations through surveillance, harassment, and politically motivated prosecutions. Hundreds of Black men were watched and imprisoned equally by the government. The COINTELPRO papers clearly list Assata Shakur, a rare case of FBI targeting of a Black female revolutionary, as one of its principal "neutralisation" targets. This fact highlights how female members were doubly threatened. She actively participated in outreach programmes within the Panthers and outside the party as well. She believed that delivering education to black people was the first step towards their liberation. Moreover, she has been continuously doing to enrich the community. Then, her involvement in women's liberation groups and later global solidarity efforts during her exile demonstrates a praxis that integrates consciousness-raising and coalition-building. These are values championed both by Crenshaw's intersectional politics, which is coalitional politics, not identity-exclusive.

As the life of Assata Shakur swings like a pendulum in the US, readers can correlate with the pain she endured. The theory of intersectionality would provide a more elaborate image of Assata's life. It is also called triple oppression, that is, class, race, and gender. Intersectionality is a critical framework for understanding how the social and political identities of groups and individuals intersect in complex and often overlapping ways, often resulting in the combination of prejudice and privilege.

Examples of these intersecting and overlapping factors include gender, caste, sex, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, disability, physical appearance, and age. Intersectionality has greatly influenced modern feminism and gender studies. It suggests that it promotes a more nuanced and complex approach to addressing power and oppression, rather than offering simplistic answers. Early writers and intellectuals, such as Cooper, Stewart, Wells, Stuart Hall, and Nira Yuval-Davis, also highlighted the interconnected nature of racial and gender oppressions, prefiguring the concept of intersectionality. It could be explained with an example;

1. A low-income, undocumented Latina immigrant faces vulnerabilities distinct from a documented Latina professional or an undocumented white man. The simultaneous impact of racism, sexism, classism, and xenophobia shapes her experience.
2. A disabled Black man encounters barriers different from a non-disabled Black man or a disabled white woman – his experience arises from the interplay of racism, ableism, and masculinity norms.
3. Political Black Feminism in the UK was practising intersectionality long before the term existed. By centring the experiences of Black and Asian women facing racism, sexism, class exploitation, and state violence (e.g., immigration controls, police brutality), they inherently understood these systems as interlocking. Assata Shakur's life exemplifies this: her targeting by the state stemmed from being a Black woman revolutionary, facing specific forms of violence and control, including the forcible separation from her child while imprisoned.

Conclusion

Intersectionality is more than a theory; it is an essential tool for navigating the rugged landscape of power and is committed to genuine justice. Because social justice and the law of equality often exist only on a theoretical level, they rarely come into effect or are not implemented. Therefore, the outsiders tied hand in hand to get justice. It forces us to meet the painful reality that systems of domination are tied together, challenging solutions that are equally interconnected and nuanced. By focusing on the experiences of those at the sharpest intersections of discrimination, like Black women, their legal erasure sparked the concept. The activists of Political Black Feminism, such as Assata Shakur, facing the state's full force, intersectionality provides a visible identification of the problems we face. It challenges simplistic narratives, demands inclusive solidarity, and insists that liberation for any group is inextricably linked to the liberation of all groups entwined within the same web of power. To ignore intersectionality is to perpetuate the very exclusions and inequalities it seeks to dismantle; to embrace it is to move towards a more just and equitable understanding of the human condition and the path to collective freedom. Her gendered imprisonment, often portrayed in the public imagination through the "female fugitive" trope, deletes the way she resisted both radicalised imposition and patriarchal sexual politics. Her voice has been sanitised in some Black Power scholarship, and her femininity exploited in mainstream eroticization of "dangerous female militant."

She embodies a dual narrative: one of criminalisation by the state, and one of idolization by movements for racial justice. This duality critically highlights how Black feminist subjects cannot surrender to singular narratives—neither victims nor criminals, but always politically complex, resisting singular categorisation. Assata Shakur's path from early life in the Panthers to fugitive and symbol of confrontation cannot be understood in a vacuum. It takes on full critical richness when read through intersectional and Black feminist frameworks. Intersectionality reveals the underlying systems that formed her trials as both political repression and gendered oppression; the ideology of the Combahee River Collective models her consciousness of those intersections and her commitment to solidarity-based liberation work. Her ongoing legacy invites current activists to build movements that do not suppress differences but are made stronger by acknowledging and articulating them. Shakur's life is finally, and always, at the crossroads of identity and political action, an unapologetic testament to the power of living at the intersection of struggle.

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