

Assata: An Autobiography Study Guide

Assata: An Autobiography by Assata Shakur

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Plot Summary

This book is an autobiography of Assata Shakur, a black revolutionary who is now living in Cuba where she has political asylum. The book tells the often shocking, yet inspiring, story of Assata's life up to her arrest and eventual escape to Cuba.

Assata, was born and named JoAnne in New York City and spent many years of her life living in New York City or in segregated North Carolina with her grandparents. She was raised to be respectful of those who respected her and to always love herself. This lesson helped her through the many difficulties she encountered as a black woman in a racist American culture. She, along with many other minorities, was brainwashed into believing she was worth less due to the color of her skin and other African features. This led to an initial hatred and distrust of all white people. These feelings of inadequacy and the arguments she had with her mother led to several dangerous run-away incidences in which she quickly became aware of the dark side of American life. Fortunately, she had a loving family who took her back in and helped to get her on a safer path.

Upon entering college, Assata became involved with various student organizations aimed at improving the college experience for black students. This involvement is the start of her interest in and involvement in improving life for African Americans and other minority groups. She realized that she had changed a great deal over the years and decided to change her name to one that truly represented who she was. She chose an African name, Assata, which means love for the people. After college and a failed marriage, she spent time in San Francisco and Berkeley studying the Black Panther Party and learning about the oppression of other groups of people. When she returned to New York, she was enthusiastic about joining the Black Panthers. This enthusiasm did wain at times, due to the arrogance of some of the BPP leaders. Finally, when her trust in the Party was at an all-time low, she decided it was time to leave the Party.

Life became more strange after leaving the Party. Her home was bugged and she knew she was being watched. After two police officers were shot and killed, she learned she was wanted for questioning. She decided to lay low and go into hiding. After several years in hiding, she finally was caught on the New Jersey Turnpike in a shoot-out. Severely wounded, she was taken to a hospital under police surveillance; she was being charged with many felonies, felonies of which Assata claims she was innocent.

Half of the book is spent giving the details of Assata's various charges and trials, acquittals, and a final conviction. She spent time in a maximum security prison in West Virginia before being brought back to New Jersey. Her relationship with her family and her daughter, who she had had while in prison, was deteriorating. She decided it was time to leave. Her grandmother's dream that she would not be in prison much longer encouraged her to escape.

The book ends with Assata in political asylum in Cuba. She compares the Cuban culture, which she describes as friendly, safe, and non-racist, to the American culture she had known and despised. The final scene is of Assata being visited by her aunt,

grandmother, mother, and daughter. She has a positive outlook now on life and hope for the freedom of her people.



Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary and Analysis

This book is an autobiography of Assata Shakur, a black revolutionary who is now living in Cuba, where she has political asylum. The book tells the often shocking yet inspiring story of Assata's life up to her arrest and eventual escape to Cuba.

In chapter one, the narrator has been shot. The police are everywhere and trying to decide if they should kill her. An ambulance arrives and the narrator is put in it; she passes out. Upon awaking, she finds herself in a hospital, surrounded by white people. She is examined and fingerprinted, and no one seems to care if she lives or dies. They repeatedly ask her why she shot the trooper, but she does not respond. She is repeatedly examined and threatened but refuses to tell the police anything. The narrator is moved to a large suite, with the purpose being to keep her in a secure location. She is repeatedly questioned and beaten when she does not respond in the way the police would like. A German nurse comes to her rescue when she sees what is going on with the narrator and gives her a call button to use whenever she is in need of a nurse. The state troopers that guard and harass her often salute each other with the Nazi salute with one trooper openly admitting his Nazi beliefs and the Nazism of many New Jersey state troopers.

The harassment continues with no way to end it. The police attempt to make a deal with her and go against her friends, who they say have started talking. When they realize she is not going to talk, they begin to leave. She is finally allowed to make a phone call and leaves messages with several lawyers' messaging services and secretaries. It is Friday and something is going on in the other room. A judge enters and reads the many charges against her. Her full name is given, JoAnne Deborah Chesimard. After the charges are read, they enter a plea of not guilty, even though all she has said is that she would like her lawyer present. Later Aunt Evelyn, her lawyer, enters; she had had to get a court order to be able to see JoAnne. They are given five minutes to talk. JoAnne then gets five minutes with her mother and sister. JoAnne remembers two black nurses at this hospital. Both are kind, and one gives her books to read. She used these books to drown out the police that harassed her, to give her strength, and to bring her peace. The chapter ends with a poem entitled "Story."

In chapter two, JoAnne begins the story of her childhood. Her parents divorced soon after she was born, and she lived with her mother in Jamaica, NY. When her grandparents moved to Wilmington, NC when she was three, she moved with them. JoAnne's grandmother was constantly on her to have self-esteem and to stand up for herself. She was also taught to have respect for those who had respect for her.

Her grandmother believed that the way to become somebody was to have what the white people have. Because of this, JoAnne was expected to play with "decent" children, not "alley rats" (p. 21). JoAnne had trouble with this, because she saw herself



as more of an "alley rat." The "decent" kids were wealthy and snobby, while the "alley rats" seemed more real. JoAnne continues with details about her high-strung and emotional family. She also talks about the segregated south and the history of black oppression.

JoAnne talks about the things she loved as a child, including the beach and the colored library. Her grandparents believed in work. She had chores to do and jobs related to her grandparents' beach business. She was fascinated by the beach and the many visitors who came to the colored beach. White people were not happy to have a colored beach and would purposely come to drive their cars over JoAnne's grandparents' road to destroy it. Through her various experiences, JoAnne realizes that American blacks' rights were under those of non-American blacks and Third-World citizens.

JoAnn talks about her school experiences from first grade through fifth grade. She experienced a great deal of prejudice and unfair treatment as one of the only black children in the school when she switched schools in third grade. This focus on white culture and life influenced JoAnne and other children. The hatred whites had for blacks infiltrated the black community as well. Not all of her school experiences were negative.

Aunt Evelyn was JoAnne's childhood heroine. She opened up new worlds of art, literature, film, etc. JoAnne's good friend, Barbara, brought JoAnne to the Catholic Church. She saw Barbara in her First Communion dress and veil and wanted the same. She goes on to explain the hoops she had to jump through to have her First Communion and to later be confirmed. The chapter ends with JoAnne describing herself as well-behaved and quiet in school, but, as soon as school was out, she was out exploring and getting dirty. She could not wait to grow up and she was changing. She was starting to like boys.



Chapters 3 and 4

Chapters 3 and 4 Summary and Analysis

At the beginning of chapter three, JoAnne is moved to prison. Black women smile and wave to her through her prison door, but she is not allowed out. The warden will not let her out because there are supposedly threats to her life. She is annoyed by the warden's superiority. In prison, JoAnne feels isolated and worries about her paralyzed arm. The prison doctor does not do anything for her. Finally, Evelyn is able to get her physical therapy supplies by going through court, and JoAnne makes up her own physical therapy exercises.

JoAnne receives letters from militant blacks, hate mail, and letters from religious people trying to save her soul. She is afraid to write back too much, and she is only allowed two letters a week. She apologizes to those who have written her and she has not been able to respond to. She is grateful for their support. She tapes a statement after she was accused as a common criminal. The tape recording is to blacks regarding the truth of her situation and the oppression of African Americans. This recording is played on radio stations and is about standing up for "Black america" (p. 49). JoAnne discusses the stupid prison rules. The women in prison are kind to JoAnne. Many are in prison for relatively minor offenses.

JoAnne begins to go crazy, so she starts running circles in her cell. The guards become annoyed and tell her to stop, but she refuses. She is glad for the harassment, because it has encouraged her to run. JoAnne and the guards continue to bother one another. Miracles begin to occur. JoAnne's hand begins to work again, she has a productive and positive meeting with Sundiata and Evelyn. JoAnne feels much stronger and sure after the meeting, because Sundiata exudes calm. Although she leaves with a more positive attitude, she is still afraid in prison. She fears the guards will come and torture or kill her at night, making it look like a suicide, so she pushes a table up against the cell bars. This small barricade came in handy one night when a group of guards tried to enter her cell. She made a great deal of noise and they left her alone.

JoAnne meets Eva, who believes she can mentally project herself to other places; many believe she is crazy. Eva talks about her prison experiences, and as JoAnne and Eva get to know each other, JoAnne realizes that at times Eva makes so much sense that she begins to wonder if it is really the rest of the world that is crazy. Trouble continues with the guards, and finally a riot occurs in the cafeteria when a female guard puts her hands on JoAnne to take her back to her cell. After the riot ends, JoAnne sits down and writes a poem about Eva, who was taken away for defending JoAnne. Most of the other women are released after the riot. When the guards try to force JoAnne to do chores, she says that slavery is against the law; she learns slavery is legal in prison.

JoAnne is taken to New York to be arraigned on a Queens bank robbery charge. Later, after JoAnne has returned to the New Jersey workhouse, she is moved again to the



basement of the Middlesex County jail, because of the workhouse's proximity to the courthouse and trial. JoAnne is treated very poorly here. JoAnne's treatment is included in a petition to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights regarding the U.S.'s treatment of prisoners. The trial begins and the jury is picked. JoAnne feels hopeless. The judge is openly prejudiced, but Sundiata stays rational and calm. One of the jurors "spills the beans." He says that JoAnne and Sundiata are black, so they are guilty. The lawyers go crazy, so the judge agrees to conduct an impartial investigation. The lawyers ask for jury selection from another county, so the trial stops. The jury is picked from Morris County, where there are hardly any non-whites. JoAnne is frustrated because the trial is unfair; the judge, prosecution, and jury are using the law against the law.

In chapter four, JoAnne begins junior high school, which is more confusing but gives her a chance to move around more. Everyone seems to be dating someone and she is teased about a boy named Joe. Joe has short legs and is very dark. Joe is sweet to JoAnne, but she does not want to get teased, so she treats him horribly. When he asks her to be his girlfriend, she tells him he is too black and ugly. He is devastated and instantly hates her. JoAnne feels awful and begins to change and stand up for herself.

JoAnne discusses how the news she would read and watch on television seemed unreal, and each year the news seemed to get worse. Her mother and stepfather's relationship is also getting worse. JoAnne says black marriages that work are a miracle, because everything is against them. As her parents changed, she also was changing. She loved to ride the subway or the bus and go into different neighborhoods; her favorite was Harlem. The problem was that she would always lose track of time or get lost and end up home late and in trouble.

The first time JoAnne ran away from home she went to her Aunt Evelyn's. Another time that JoAnne runs away, she finds herself in dangerous situations, including being encouraged to steal. When a dangerous jewelry theft is complete, JoAnne is ready to go home.



Chapters 5 and 6

Chapters 5 and 6 Summary and Analysis

In chapter five, Assata is moved to a federal prison. A new trial for a New York robbery has been added to Assata's long list of possible convictions. She arrives on Rikers Island, where most of the female guards are black. A bunch of women were brought in; this was wonderful for Assata but also very overwhelming. She has been alone for so long, she has trouble talking. Next, an embarrassing and humiliating strip search takes place. Once Assata agrees to the search, she is allowed to go to her cell. When asked if she committed any of the crimes she is charged with, she says no.

While in prison, Assata sees an old friend named Simba. They had been close while they were both members of the Black Panthers Party. Later, Assata meets with Evelyn, who is trying to figure out what is going on with this new, unexpected trial. Both Assata and a man named Kamau are charged with the New York robbery. The judge denies all motions for Kamau and Assata. They are forced to go to trial right away. Kamau and Assata are both beaten when Kamau goes to hug his daughter. Both Kamau and Assata decide they need to stand up for themselves. They take over their trial by openly talking to the jury about the judge. They are both sent out but later let back in. They continue to tell the truth but are thrown out again. The crowd in the courtroom beginning chanting and shouting at Kamau and Assata leave. They are now banned from the courtroom and enjoy the privacy of their holding cell.

A relationship develops between Assata and Kamau but Assata is worried about becoming intimate because she is unsure if she wants to risk pregnancy. She loves Kamau and decides she is prepared to take this risk. As soon as Kamau and Assata return to court, they continue talking about the judge. The jury takes a long time to come to a decision and Evelyn and Bob come in, grinning, to say that it was a hung jury. They have to be tried again with a new judge; this also gives them time to put together a defense. The prosecution does not have a case with false and missing evidence.

Assata and Evelyn get into an argument and Assata decides to defend herself; she decides she will be unable to do this, so she begins looking for a new lawyer. She finds Florence Kennedy, who is not a criminal lawyer. Flo is unsure she should take the case, but Assata tells her she needs a political lawyer, which is what Flo is. Flo agrees to be her legal adviser.

In chapter six, JoAnne's parents split up and she moves with her mother and sister into a co-op in South Jamaica, New York. After a fight with her mother, JoAnne heads for the Village (Greenwich Village). JoAnne meets many strange, crazy, and possibly dangerous people as a run-away. She stays in a cheap hotel where she meets a black woman named Miss Shirley, who later turns out, to JoAnne's surprise, to be a man. Miss Shirley helps her get a job but encourages her to return home and go back to school. When one of Evelyn's friend finds JoAnne and Evelyn comes to get her, she tells her

everything. Her aunt lets the hotel and her boss know that they could be prosecuted for contributing to the delinquency of a minor because JoAnne is only thirteen years old.



Chapters 7 and 8

Chapters 7 and 8 Summary and Analysis

In chapter seven, Kamau and Assata are acquitted of the bank robbery, and Assata receives a great deal of attention from the media back at the Morristown jail in New Jersey. Assata and Evelyn had reconciled, so Evelyn is back on the case. Unfortunately, the judge sends the case back to the state court. Evelyn thoroughly questions possible jurors, who finally admit to some form of racism or prejudice towards black people. Outside, Nazis marched in front of the courthouse, and New Jersey was known as the "Upsouth" with many KKK members and Nazis.

Assata realizes she is pregnant and is very happy but also helpless to protect her unborn child. She has pains and sees the doctor. He says she might miscarry and suggests she have an abortion and refuses to call a gynecologist. Assata's lawyers are able to have the trial postponed until Assata could be seen by a gynecologist. Dr. Garrett is the kind, black doctor who comes to examine Assata. There was a lot of activity going on in court, but Assata was too ill to understand what is happening; Evelyn and Ray, Sundiata's lawyer, are worried. Dr. Garrett decides that Assata should be hospitalized and will fight for this; she is hospitalized and Sundiata must go on trial alone.

In chapter eight, JoAnne has moved in with Evelyn on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. She loves the neighborhood and all the parks and museums the neighborhood offers. She also gets a first glimpse at the hierarchy of American society by studying the socio-economic status of her neighbors and those living on nearby streets and began to have opinions about various political groups, developing a negative view of liberals. Evelyn is a good influence on JoAnne by attempting to keep her off the street, discussing various topics with her, and encouraging her to read and learn.

JoAnne and her friends enjoy writing poetry and discussing current events. While spending the summer with her grandparents, the NAACP rents a building near her grandparents' home. This is of great interest to JoAnne. At this time, JoAnne still believes that blacks and minorities could appeal to the white conscience, the north is better than the south, and that blacks are making progress. Twenty years later she has lost faith in the country and her beliefs that one could get freedom by appealing to the oppressor's moral sense. She still believes race wars should be avoided and would do no good, but you must be prepared to defend yourself by any means necessary.



Chapters 9 and 10

Chapters 9 and 10 Summary and Analysis

In chapter nine, Assata is taken to Roosevelt Hospital and treated very poorly and finally, after only ten days, moved to solitary confinement. They do all they could to thwart all that Dr. Garrett had been trying to do for her. Her lawyers file a lawsuit against the state of New Jersey for medical maltreatment. She is extradited to the State of New York, which makes the federal court action worthless. She arrives back at Rikers Island anemic and malnourished. Dr. Garrett is prevented from delivering her baby. When she goes into labor, she is taken to Elmhurst Hospital where a demonstration takes place outside the hospital and a press conference with Evelyn and Dr. Garrett. They finally agree to let Dr. Garrett deliver the baby if she signs a waiver form relieving the hospital of any responsibility. Her baby is born and is quickly taken from her. Dr. Garrett has to write a prescription for breastfeeding. She is discharged without her doctor's consent and taken back to the Women's House of Detention at Riker's Island. Complications and abuse continue regarding her ability to be examined by her own doctor and her refusal to let anyone else examine her. Evelyn files a writ of habeas corpus against the commissioner and superintendent of Riker's to get them to release Assata from punitive segregation. The chapter ends with Assata being tricked into being examined by another doctor, still in jail, and without her baby. She writes a poem about what is left in her life and who she is.

In chapter ten, JoAnne drops out of high school at seventeen to get a job; this was a rude awakening. She ends up with a low-paying, boring job and decides to go to night school to receive her high school diploma, which she sees as a meaningless piece of paper and degree. At first she is glad to have a job and be a part of something, but this gradually leads to her being fired for openly supporting riots. The snobby secretaries at this first job force her to think about what she believes and encourage her to stand up for herself and her beliefs.

JoAnne and her friend Bonnie make friends with a group of African college students who reveals to them how little they knew about the world and even about their own country. Her ignorance embarrasses her, so she starts to read about current events and to not assume that what she has been taught actually is correct. These friends are then compared to the well-educated blacks with whom she parties. These well-off blacks are superficial and self-centered. She knows she does not fit in with this group but is not sure where to find her niche.

JoAnne is hired by a black employment agency, which excites her at first. Soon she sees that they are controlled by the powers that be as much as anyone else when they host a job fair for educated blacks and most of the companies at the fair are only there to show that they have considered blacks for various positions, which is required by law. Most of the blacks leave the conference without being hired and some without even getting an interview. JoAnne is furious and creates her own resume; she is hired by



several different employers, but is soon fired from each job after background checks are done, which proves her resume is a lie. Bonnie suggests that JoAnne go to college, because "If you're smart enough to fool them, you're smart enough to play their game." (158) When her friend Kenya sees her messy room, which he sees as representing her messy life and the mess in her head, she decides it is time to take control of her life, move home to her mother, and go back to school.



Chapters 11 and 12

Chapters 11 and 12 Summary and Analysis

In chapter eleven, Assata is accused of a Queens bank robbery, pleads not guilty, and is returned to the workhouse. She is later forced into putting on the same clothes and standing in the same pose as the thief on the surveillance video. This photograph may then be superimposed over the original shot of the thief, to help convince the jury that she is the person on the video. The judge admits on the tape to believing that JoAnne was guilty and is removed from the case.

Assata at first worries about a kidnapping case she is charged with, because she is charged with two other defendants and worries that one might be a plant. After meeting him, she realizes he is not; he is a young man named Ronald who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Rema, the other defendant, and Assata are energized by the plight of this young man and begin doing their own research into the case. Assata learns that Rema dies trying to escape his cell; she is very upset and writes a poem in memory of Rema. The trial has a black judge, which gives the illusion of justice, so the prosecution must be sure of a conviction. Evelyn lets Assata give the opening statement. She compares the situation she and others are in to the Salem Witch Trials. She goes on to explain the purpose of the Black Liberation Army, which stands for freedom and justice for all people. The prosecution makes the trial into a circus, which falls apart as the witnesses are cross-examined. Once the many lies were discovered, Assata and Ronald were acquitted.

In chapter twelve, JoAnne begins taking courses at Manhattan Community College, or MCC, and finds that her interests lie in history, psychology, and sociology. She becomes involved with student organizations involved in improving college life for minorities. JoAnne begins to change both inside and out; she lets her hair grow into an afro, which represents the love she has for her heritage and her desire to help the black community. She continues to learn about black heritage and the many misconceptions she had once believed as truth. She tells the truth about Lincoln and the Civil War. JoAnne becomes more active. She is involved in demonstrations around the city and learns about being a part of an organization.

JoAnne is enthusiastic about being a part of something important that would help black people. After attending a meeting of the New Afrikans, her life becomes an African life. She has been given an African name by the New Afrikans, but it means nothing to her. She decides to change her name to something that is relevant to who she is now. She chooses Assata Olugbala Shakur, she who struggles, love for the people, the thankful.

Assata gets involved teaching a summer program for students who are academically at-risk; she thoroughly enjoys the experience and learns a great deal about children, those in need, her culture, and herself. Once she returns to school in the fall, activism is at an all-time high, which anti-war protests and the development of communist groups. Assata

believes whites and blacks should fight together but must be on equal ground, rather than the whites helping the blacks. She ends the chapter with a poem in honor of her mother.



Chapters 13 and 14

Chapters 13 and 14 Summary and Analysis

In chapter thirteen, Martin Luther King has been murdered and Assata is in shock. It seems a riot is about to begin, and tanks are at the ready. Rioting is not enough for Assata; she wants blood. She is constantly thinking about revolution.

Assata graduates from college and gets married. She realizes after a year that she was not ready for marriage, and he wanted their marriage to be like his parents' marriage. His mother was the homemaker and his father was the breadwinner. Assata then leaves for California where everything is happening.

Assata stays in Berkeley, which is the most radical and progressive place she has ever known. In San Francisco and Berkeley, revolution does not seem too far away, but other, very conservative areas of America could not be forgotten. Assata keeps struggling, not knowing when what she learned would come in handy. Assata works as an assistant to a doctor at Alcatraz. Here she learns not only about medicine but about the struggles of the Native Americans on Alcatraz. She then wants to check out the millions of revolutionary groups in the San Francisco Bay area. Assata learns that the unfair treatment the blacks had been facing was also a significant problem for the Hispanic and Asian communities; so, she feels all who are oppressed must work together to be free.

Assata wants to meet members of the Red Guard, a Chinese revolutionary group. She gets her chance when two members save her and her friends from getting attacked by the police. Assata and her friends are embarrassed to be caught smoking pot and relaxing when they should be alert and prepared to act. Assata seriously begins to wonder about becoming a revolutionary. She checks out the Oakland Black Panther Party headquarters; she has a lot of respect for this group because they make clear who the enemy is: not white people, but capitalistic imperialistic oppressors. She is asked why she has not joined the party; she is honest and says she was turned off by the spokesperson's arrogant attitude. Surprisingly, the Panthers agreed with her. She began dropping into headquarters regularly. When a seventeen-year-old is killed when he attempts to rescue his brother, a revolutionary, from prison, Assata doubts her own courage. It is time to get her act together; she decides that when she returns to New York she will join the Party.

In chapter fourteen, Assata is moved to MCC, the federal prison, Manhattan Correctional Center to await another bank robbery trial. Surprisingly, she is put into general population. She describes federal prison and the big timers who are locked up. She mentions women she had known from Riker's Island and how they are dealing with serving time in the federal prison. One woman had worked hard to get better health care for the female prisoners and, ironically, died from undiagnosed uterine cancer.



The Queens bank robbery trial was the wildest Assata had encountered, and she had to find a new lawyer. Evelyn had another case that was going to court at the same time. Although hesitant prior to meeting him, Assata hires Stanley Cohen, a white Jewish man, to be her attorney. He was feisty and interested in winning. Fortunately for them, the prosecution makes a circus out of the trial and had not prepared for the strong cross-examination, the defense's expert rebuttal, and a strong witness. Assata is acquitted and taken back to Riker's Island and put into solitary confinement.



Chapters 15 and 16

Chapters 15 and 16 Summary and Analysis

In chapter fifteen, Assata energetically walks into the Black Panther Party office in New York, determined to give it everything she has. She gets involved instantly, helping to file paperwork and then attending a meeting in Philadelphia regarding a Washington, D.C. Constitutional Convention. She is assigned to the medical cadre, in charge of Panther health care. She soon experiences first hand the arrogance of some in leadership positions in the Party and speaks her mind. Assata tells of her experiences and growth while in the party, and the more she learned, the more she became critical of the Political Education programs the Party offered.

Assata discusses the power of the outside world on the Party and the Party's image in the media. The struggle has brought her into contact with some wonderful people, one of these being her friend Zayd. She becomes involved in Zayd's meetings with white groups; he is patient while she is loud and angry. She believes this is the reason why he wanted her there; she was the "perfect angry Panther" (p. 224).

At this time, strange things start to happen, and she is not happy, politically, with the Party. Her house has been bugged and she is being watched while she is away from home. The Party acts irrationally and disorderly. Things seem to be going from bad to worse, and Assata questions whether she should continue being a part of the Party. She and Zayd have a falling-out; she did not realize the extreme pressure he was under to try to keep the peace between various powerful members of the Party. No one in the party seems to realize that the FBI's counterintelligence program is being used in the Party to divide and conquer. Assata decides it is time to leave the party, but after leaving, her life becomes more and more impossible. When she decides she could no longer stay in her apartment, a friend warns her she should not return. The police are waiting for her. She decides to lay low for awhile.

In chapter sixteen, Assata realizes that her "Mission: Impossible" view of going underground is very inaccurate (p. 234). By the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s, it seems that everyone was going underground to get away from the police and false accusations. Due to this, it is difficult for anyone to organize. One day, she is shocked to hear on the radio that two policemen had been machine-gunned. She feels sorry for their families but is relieved that minorities are not the only ones being attacked and killed. Soon, however, Assata learns she is wanted for questioning related to this shooting.

Assata goes to her girlfriend's house, where she had already had plans to be. Her friend tells her to stay with her and make preparations to leave. The day Assata leaves it is early morning and she is dressed as a poor black woman. Upon entering the train, she feels very strange. She glances around and realizes that most of the women in the train car are poor and black, wearing a wig just like the one she is wearing as part of her

disguise. She wonders if they are all running and hiding and prays for the day when they can all come out from under the wigs.



Chapters 17 and 18

Chapters 17 and 18 Summary and Analysis

In chapter seventeen, Assata travels a lot over the next few years. She learns much about the Black Liberation Army and its many organizations and collectives of which it was comprised. Many revolutionaries are in prison or forced underground. They want to take the struggle to a higher level but did not know how. They lack many important aspects required for success; they first and most importantly must politically mobilize, educate, and organize the masses of black people. The revolutionary struggle is slow and scientific, and freedom will not be won above ground. It must start building underground structures as soon as possible. They must act in a calculated manner.

In chapter eighteen, Assata is kept in solitary confinement for over a year in the Middlesex County Jail for Men until the New Jersey trial is over. A civil suit is filed for her living conditions at this time. Many lawyers, besides Evelyn and Stanley, are hired. This results in too many "cooks in the kitchen." To add to these internal problems, no experts would risk siding with the defense, since many of them worked for the police and this was a case in which police had been shot. Many volunteered to help the defense, and Assata thanks them all for their support.

Stanley visits with positive news. He has made progress in finding experts. Sadly, Stanley is found dead, with conflicting stories on how he died. All the legal papers have been taken in by the New York City Police as evidence. It takes over a month to have them returned and many go missing. The judge's strategy in this trial is to intimidate and hassle the lawyers. He does this very successfully by attempting to throw each lawyer out of court multiple times. The climate of the trial is set by the killing of a man in Utah. He is the first person to be legally executed since the death penalty was reinstated. Appleby, the judge, alone questions potential jurors; the trial goes downhill from here. There is no chance for a fair and impartial trial. Assata wonders why she even bothered. Looking back she believes it is because she had so much success in the past and believed it could happen again. She has participated in her own oppression.

Chapters 19 and 20

Chapters 19 and 20 Summary and Analysis

In chapter nineteen, Assata is moved to the Maximum Security Prison for Women in Alderson, West Virginia, which is for "the most dangerous women in the country" (p. 253). Under the interstate compact agreement, any prisoner can be shipped to any facility within U.S. territory. Assata is placed in the Maximum Security Unit (MSU), which is a prison within a prison. There are three major groups in MSU: the Nazis, the "niggah lovers," and Assata (p. 253). Luckily, Rita Brown, a white revolutionary from the West Coast, is part of the "niggah lovers." Assata respects her as an activist and a woman. When the prison is declared unconstitutional, she is able to spend some time with the general population. Many of the women are like those she had met at Riker's Island. The most important person she meets was Lolita Lebron, one of the most respected political prisoners in the world. Lolita and Assata disagree regarding the relationship between religion and socialism. Assata begins studying liberation theology so she could have an intellectual conversation with Lolita, but never gets the chance. MSU was closed, and Assata is shipped back to New Jersey. Lolita is later freed.

In chapter twenty, Assata's daughter comes with Assata's mother for a visit. Assata has seen her once a week her entire life, except while she was in West Virginia. This has taken a toll on mother, daughter, and grandmother. She calls her mother, Mommy Assata and her grandmother, Mommy. Her daughter does not believe her at first that she cannot escape. She realizes her mother is telling her the truth when she tries to break through the bars. When visitation time is over and she walks out of the prison like a "little adult," Assata decides it is time to leave. She ends the chapter with a poem to her daughter, Kakuya.



Chapter 21 and Postscript

Chapter 21 and Postscript Summary and Analysis

In chapter twenty-one, Assata's grandmother comes from North Carolina to visit her in prison. She comes to tell Assata a dream she has had; her dreams always come true, so this is very important. The dream is that Assata is out of prison very soon and in Jamaica. This dream gives her hope and she dances and chants in her cell. Her mother had told her to win a race, you must talk to yourself and give yourself encouragement. This is something she has not forgotten. She calls her grandparents a day or two before she escapes to hear their voices. Her grandmother says she loves her and does not want her to get used to being in the prison. She says she will not. Now that she is free, she keeps in mind that black people are still oppressed in America. People can get used to anything, even oppression. The chapter ends with a poem about remembering and passing on tradition.

In the Postscript, Assata is free and so completely happy that the dream came true. She is thankful to her comrades who helped her adjust to life outside of prison. She realizes she has changed in so many ways from the innocent revolutionary she had once been. She now truly realizes how the fight for black freedom must be an international fight to end oppression all over the world. She describes Havana, her new home, as a beautiful city where doors are wide open and the streets are safe. Her neighbors do not believe her when she tells them of the poverty and suffering in the U.S. She is amazed at the Cuban progress since their revolution, and she is embarrassed to say she is American. The U.S. too quickly supports war and violence without ever realizing who this affects. Racism in Cuba is not nearly as violent or institutionalized because there is a strong tradition of blacks and whites fighting together for liberation. When she asked someone who spoke English regarding race relations, she was told that racism is illegal in Cuba; Assata could not believe that this could have happened in the twenty-five years since the revolution, but she eventually was convinced it was true. When speaking with black Cubans, she learns that they do not see themselves as Africans; they are Cuban. Though some racism exists, each generation is losing that prejudice. Also, Cubans do not see themselves as white or black. They have many different names for the various shades of brown that have no tie to Africa or slavery; this was difficult for Assata to come to grips with. She respects the Cuban government for all they have done for race relations.

The book ends with emotional phone calls to Aunt Evelyn, her mother, and her daughter, Kakuya and their trip to Cuba to finally see Assata after so many years of struggle. Assata is determined that black people will be free.



Characters

JoAnne Deborah Byron Chesimard/Assata Shakur

This woman is the author of the book, which is a story of her life. JoAnne was born in New York City and spent many years of her life living here or in segregated North Carolina with her grandparents. She was raised to be respectful of those who respected her and to always love herself. This lesson helped her through the many difficulties she encountered as a black woman in a racist American culture. She, along with many other minorities, was brainwashed into believing she was worthless due to the color of her skin and other African features. This led to an initial hatred and distrust of all white people. These feelings of inadequacy and the arguments she had with her mother led to several dangerous run-away incidences in which she quickly became aware of the dark side of American life. Fortunately, she had a loving family who took her back in and helped to get her on a safer path.

Upon entering college, Assata became involved with various student organizations aimed at improving the college experience for black students. This involvement is the start of her interest in and involvement in improving life for African Americans and other minority groups. She realized that she had changed a great deal over the years and decided to change her name to one that truly represented who she was. She chose an African name, Assata, which means "love for the people." After college and a failed marriage, she spent time in San Francisco and Berkeley studying the Black Panther Party and learning about the oppression of other groups of people. When she returned to New York, she was enthusiastic about joining the Black Panthers. This enthusiasm did wain at times, due to the arrogance of some of the BPP leaders. Finally, when her trust in the Party was at an all-time low, she decided it was time to leave the Party.

Life became more strange after leaving the Party. Her home was bugged and she knew she was being watched. After two police officers were shot and killed, she learned she was wanted for questioning. She decided to lay low and go into hiding. After several years in hiding, she finally was caught on the New Jersey Turnpike in a shoot-out. Severely wounded, she was taken to a hospital under police surveillance; she was being charged with many felonies, felonies of which Assata claims she was innocent.

Half of the book is spent giving the details of Assata's various charges and trials, acquittals, and a final conviction. She spent time in a maximum security prison in West Virginia before being brought back to New Jersey. Her relationship with her family and her daughter, who she had had while in prison, was deteriorating. She decided it was time to leave. Her grandmother's dream that she would not be in prison much longer encouraged her to escape.

The book ends with Assata in political asylum in Cuba. She compares the Cuban culture, which she describes as friendly, safe, and non-racist, to the American culture she had known and despised. The final scene is of Assata being visited by her



grandmother, mother, and daughter. She has a positive outlook now on life and hope for the freedom of her people.

Aunt Evelyn

Aunt Evelyn is a huge influence on Assata throughout her life. She is an attorney who, prior to Assata's arrest, is a professor in the NYU law school. She teaches Assata about art, literature, food, and other aspects of culture. She repeatedly saves Assata from a life on the streets and encourages her to continue her education. She, along with Assata's mother and grandmother, play a large role in molding Assata into the woman she later became.

When Assata is arrested, Evelyn drops everything to represent her. She even serves a ten-day sentence for contempt of court. Evelyn is completely devoted to Assata and not once does she not trust her. When Assata escapes from prison and decides to call her family five years later, Evelyn is the first person she calls. Assata realizes at this time how much her family has been through because of her. Although it has been a long struggle, Evelyn continues to be a strong woman throughout this incredible story.

Mother

Assata's mother is a hard-working, studious woman who raises her children, works full time, and attends night school to receive her college degree so that she may become a teacher. Her discipline and work ethic is ingrained in Assata.

Beverly

Beverly is Assata's younger sister. Assata remembers teasing her as a child for looking more black than her. She and Assata share an emotional meeting together when Assata is first arrested.

Zayd Malik Shakur

Zayd becomes one of Assata's close friends and is a member of the Black Panther Party. They were closely together on many Party events but have a falling-out that reveals the stress they are both under. The story begins with Zayd's death on the New Jersey Turnpike, and only through the story of Assata's life does the reader learn how important he was to her.

Law Enforcement

Law enforcement comes in many forms in this book. Some are New Jersey State Troopers, who give each other the Nazi salute. Others are FBI agents and other



members of the police force who use divide-and-conquer tactics to cause dissent in various black liberation organizations. Still, others are judges and lawyers who are often openly biased and want to see Assata and other revolutionaries behind bars, convicted of crimes whether they committed them or not.

Sundiata

Sundiata is a co-defendant with Assata on one of the many robberies Assata is accused of committing. He is self-assured and calm and helps to relieve some of the stress and anxiety Assata is feeling.

The Defense Team

Stanley Cohen, Afeni Shakur, Florence Kennedy, and Bob Bloom are several of the attorneys that fight for Assata's freedom. They all give up and risk much to defend her.

JoAnne's/Assata's Family

Her family plays a large role in her beliefs and actions. Although arguments and falling-outs do take place, they are always supportive of her. Several of them visit her in Cuba where she has political asylum.

Black Brothers and Sisters

These are the people that Assata fights with and for throughout her entire life. Her goal is to see them liberated from the oppressors.

White People

These are the people Assata first blames for her inequality. As she matures and becomes more educated, she realizes that no one of any color is to blame for prejudice, only those who oppress are to blame.

JoAnne's/Assata's School Friends

These friends support and challenge JoAnne/Assata throughout her life. Some encourage her in positive directions, and others lead her astray. They all play a role in the development of her character and beliefs.



Black Women in Prison

Assata frequently talks about the pride and love she feels for these women. Despite their dire circumstances, they are often funny, loving, and feisty. They help Assata find perspective in her own life.

Eva

This female prisoner was thought to be crazy by most. Assata became close to her and often wondered if it was really the world that was crazy.

Kamau

This fellow prisoner and co-defendant became an intimate friend of Assata's. He is the father of her child, Kakuya.

Activists and Revolutionaries

These individuals and groups of brave people encouraged, taught, and helped to develop Assata into the revolutionary that she had wanted so long to become. Those she disagreed with some of what they taught and their actions, she always believed that these people and organizations were necessary for those oppressed around the world to be freed.

Kakuya

This is Assata's daughter who was born while Assata was in prison. She suffered from the imprisonment of her mother, having a hard time as a child dealing with seeing her mother behind bars. Only when Kakuya is ten years old is she able to see her mother as a free woman.



Objects/Places

New Jersey Turnpike

This is where Assata is shot and then caught by the police.

Middlesex County Hospital

This is where Assata recovers from her wounds inflicted upon her by the New Jersey State Troopers.

New York

This is where Assata was born and raised. She loved to wander around this city, checking out all the people and neighborhoods.

North Carolina

This is where Assata lived for awhile as a child and spent her summers. She loved spending time on the beach here but also experienced the effects of segregation.

The Beach

This is where Assata loved to spend her days while living with her grandparents. She enjoyed watching those who came to the beach, especially those who were seeing the ocean for the first time.

Carolina Beach Amusement Park

This is the park that Assata's mother pretended she was a Spanish visitor who was insulted that she was seen as a black woman and, subsequently not allowed into the park. The park manager allowed her to buy tickets for herself and her children. This is when it first becomes clear and few rights American blacks had.

School

Assata learns a great deal about the world from her experiences in school. She experiences first-hand the effects of segregation and inequality. She also is brainwashed into believing the history her teachers taught her and believing that she was inferior. School also was a place where Assata learned about her culture and became involved in student organizations aiming to improve life for students.



Bailey Theater

This is where Assata bravely walked up to a counter in the white section of this theater to buy an Elvis poster. She was very proud for standing up for herself, but later hid the poster when she learned Elvis Presley was racist.

Catholic Church

Assata falls in love with the beautiful white gown and veil her friend wears for her First Communion; she wants the same. So, she attends classes and jumps through the required hoops to complete her own First Communion. Sadly, the feelings she felt seeing her friend in her gown disappeared when she experienced the rigorous rituals and dogma of the Catholic Church.

Middlesex County Workhouse/Prison/Middlesex County Jail Base

This is where Assata spends her time while waiting for her trials to take place and be completed. Lawsuits are filed for the horrible living conditions she is forced to endure in these places.

Court

This is what Assata compares to a circus. It reveals how much the law uses the law against itself.

San Francisco/Berkeley

This is where Assata goes after she divorces her husband. It is the most radical and progressive place she has ever been. She learns much about the Black Panther Party, guerrilla warfare, and communism while living here.

Cuba

This is a country that Assata finds to be beautiful, safe, and racism-free. It is her new home where she has political asylum.

Themes

Oppression

Oppression is a theme from the moment the story begins. Assata has just been shot and the police are undecided as to whether they should put her in an ambulance or kill her, because she is both black and a member of the Black Liberation Army and a former member of the Black Panther Party. This theme continues through the rest of the book and exists throughout Assata's entire life.

As a child, her first understanding of oppression is when she is only allowed into colored-only sections of the south and sees the stress her mother is under to be a good mother and an asset to society, while living in a world that is severely unjust. She often becomes angry, sad, and frustrated when she sees the freedom white people had in contrast to the oppressed life she lived. The media only made the oppression worse by focusing on white society and stereotypes of what was good and bad. The black people were so brainwashed by what they saw, read, and heard, that they too believed that they were an inferior race. Only through Assata's positive upbringing, eye-opening experiences, and involvement with black organizations was she able to build her self-esteem and begin to help other people see through the stereotypes and lies they had been told their entire lives.

This oppression continues throughout Assata's life and is the main focus of the book. Her main goal of this book is to convince others of the oppressive world in which they live and to do something about it. Although this is an autobiography, it can also be seen as the biography of all oppressed peoples.

Prejudice

The theme of prejudice is closely tied to the theme of oppression. Assata was born into a world filled with prejudice and hate. This prejudice helped to form her early views of herself, her culture, and white America. Only with time and many hours spent listening about, researching, and studying this prejudice and its consequences was she able to begin to remove the prejudice from her own beliefs.

Along with the purpose of encouraging others to fight oppression, the fight must begin with ending prejudice. One's mind must be changed before one's actions can be changed. Many people Assata encountered, particularly white people, did not even realize that they had any racist views. They believed what they had been told by their society and the media without realizing they had been taught to distrust and hate those that were different from them.

Initially, Assata, like many others, focused on inequality towards black Americans. Then, through her many learning experiences, she realized the fight also included other minority groups in the U.S. Later, especially upon moving to Cuba, she realized that the



fight against prejudice and oppression was that all oppressed peoples and those who suffer from prejudice must fight together. This fight must be international.

Power

Another theme tied to prejudice and oppression is power. Assata's entire life involved power struggles. The white people had power over minorities and were afraid of losing that power by giving more freedom to the oppressed. Blacks and other minority groups dreamed and fought for the day when they would be equally as powerful as the white man, with many so full of hatred that they wanted to over-power the white people.

Power was seen in this book, not only in the white people and leaders of black organizations, it was also seen in black women. Many of the characters Assata describes are poor, black women trying to free themselves, their families, and their people. Even those women in prison struggled to stay positive and improve prison living conditions.

Of all the strong and powerful black women, Assata is one of the strongest and most powerful. She does not have power in the sense that she controls others or has a lot of material wealth. She studied what was going on around her and was open and willing to change. If she saw a need for improvement in herself or anywhere else, she worked for it. She never accepted defeat and encouraged others in this book and through the writing of this book to fight for their freedom and the freedom of others.

Style

Perspective

This book is primarily written in first person. The author is both the narrator and the subject of the book. This gives the book a very personal feel, which is necessary when one writes one's autobiography.

To add variety and to aid in explaining the personalities and view points of the other characters, the author also has quotes of other people in relation to her or on a topic discussed in front of her. For example, she quotes a discussion she frequently had with her grandmother as a child to show her grandmother's personality and desire to see her stand up for herself.

Poems are also included throughout the book. The first poem sets the tone for the book. Others are used to bring a chapter to a conclusion. Still, others are written as a message from the author to someone who is or was important in her life. These poems, besides giving insight into how the author feels about various issues and people, also reveal much about the author's personality and abilities as a writer and poet.

Tone

The tone of this book varies depending on the time in which the story takes place and what is happening in specific points in the book. When Assata is young, the tone is often joyful and carefree. When she, as a child, experiences racism and inequality, the tone changes to one of disappointment, sadness, or anger.

Throughout the story, the tone of the book is affected by what is taking place in Assata's life. It also is a reflection of how she feels about herself and those around her. She uses derogatory terms to express her anger and hatred towards certain types of people. For example, she often calls police officers fascist pigs. She uses many analogies and metaphors to give the reader a clearer picture of the event taking place and Assata's own emotional state.

Overall, the tone of this book is emotionally-charged, which sometimes gives the book a subjective feel. Assata does give a great deal of information to support her beliefs but often her emotions lead her to think and say very shocking things. This shock often leads the reader to feelings of disbelief and possibly doubt. Both the horrendous information she gives and the way she delivers this information lends to the book a sort of surreal feeling. It is hard to believe this is a true story and not a fictitious novel.



Structure

The structure of this book is partially chronological. Every other chapter details the life of Assata from the time she is arrested on the New Jersey Turnpike to her escape from prison and political asylum in Cuba. The other chapters begin with her birth and childhood. These chapters lead the reader through her childhood, through young adulthood, and up to the time in which she is wanted by the police and decides to go underground.

This structure gives the book the feel of a novel, so it is a very engaging read. Although the chapters do jump back and forth between the present and the past, it is quite simple to follow the events, because the events are told in a chronological order within each chapter and the emotions expressed and events that take place throughout the book are very closely related and connected.

The structure simply adds variety and a sense of surprise to what could be a very serious and heavy read. The structure, combined with the analytical, yet emotional tone of the book and the first person perspective, make for an autobiography that is both objective and subjective. It gives events from Assata's view but also includes historical facts that Assata uses to back her beliefs and actions. Although many things that are said and events that take place are extremely shocking, the way the book has been written convinces the reader that the events within this book are sadly true.



Quotes

"His face breaks into a kind of reserved smile and, very discreetly, he clenches his fist and gives me the power sign. That man will never know how much better he made me feel at that moment."

p. 6

"It was all so spooky I knew that this had to be the real god."

p. 41

"You'll be in jail wherever you go."

p. 60

"Eva and I got along famously...at times she made so much sense I wondered if it was really the world that was crazy."

p. 61

"These people can lock us up, but they can't stop life, just like they can't stop freedom."

p. 88

"I don't need a criminal lawyer because this isn't a criminal case. I need a political lawyer."

p. 98

"The almighty dollar is king; those who have the most money control the country and, through campaign contributions, buy and sell presidents, congressmen, and judges, the ones who pass the laws and enforce the laws that benefit their benefactors."

p. 139

"The rich have always used racism to maintain power."

p. 139

"I had learned, through experience, that they were all lies told by stupid people, but I never thought I could be so easily tricked into being against something I didn't understand. It's got to be one of the most basic principles of living: always decide who your enemies are for yourself, and never let your enemies choose your enemies for you."

p. 152

"It seemed everybody was in some kind of bag, the dope bag, the whiskey brown paper bag, the Jesus bag, the love bag, the sex bag, the make-it bag, and none of those bags were doing anybody any good. I was looking for my own bag, but the pickings were slim."

p. 155



"You can do almost anything you want as long as you organize yourself to do it."
p. 159

"It was time to take control. Life was like a bus: you could either be a passenger and go along for the ride, or you could be the driver."
p. 159

"People are tried and convicted in the newspapers and on television before they ever see a courtroom."
p. 168

"No movement can survive unless it is constantly growing and changing with the times"
p. 181

"The schools we go to are reflections of the society that created them. Nobody is going to give you the education you need to overthrow them."
p. 181

"My life became an African life, my surroundings took on an African flavor, my spirit took on an African glow."
p. 185

"[t]he revolutionary struggle of Black people had to be against racism, capitalism, imperialism, and sexism and for real freedom under a socialist government."
p. 197

"Revolution is about change, and the first place the change begins is in yourself."
p. 203

"You shouldn't be here," I told him. "You should be in the White House with all the other big-time con artists." "I was trying, he said, "I was trying like hell."
p. 209

"To win any struggle for liberation, you have to have the way as well as the will, an overall ideology and strategy that stem from a scientific analysis of history and present conditions."
p. 242

"People get used to anything. The less you think about your oppression, the more your tolerance for it grows."
p. 262



Topics for Discussion

Why does the author change her name from JoAnne to Assata? What does her new name mean? How does this name suit her personality and her lifestyle? Would she encourage others to change their names? Why or why not? Would you change your name? Why or why not?

Describe Assata's experiences in the segregated south. How did these experiences affect her throughout her life? Does she believe the north is any better than the south? Why or why not? Where might she feel the most free, within the U.S.? Why? Do you feel free where you live? Why or why not?

How are revolutionaries and other minorities are framed for various crimes? Why are they framed? What does this reveal about law enforcement in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s? Are you surprised by the information Assata gives in this book regarding the police? Why or why not? Do you believe the police have become more objective and fair since this time? Why or why not?

Why does Assata spend much of her imprisonment in isolation? What does this isolation do to her mentally and physically? Is this isolation fair? Why or why not? What does it reveal about those who have placed her in isolation?

Why does Assata decide to risk becoming pregnant? How did she come to this decision? How does this pregnancy and the birth of her child affect her court cases? How is does her imprisonment affect her relationship with her child? Do you believe she should have taken this risk? Why or why not?

What words are spelled differently in this book? What is the purpose of this? Why are some words capitalized and others are not? What does this reveal about Assata and her views? How does this subtly reflect her beliefs about the U.S., various cultures, and herself? How do you feel about these subtle grammatical changes?

What detailed historical information does Assata give? Why does she give this information? Are you surprised by anything she shares? Why or why not? What does this information reveal about the U.S.? How does it support her views? Does it change your views on U.S. history? Why or why not?

Why does Assata now live in Cuba? What are her thoughts about her new home? Are you surprised by her description of Cuba? Why or why not? Do you believe she will ever be able to return to the U.S.? Why or why not? How does this move to Cuba affect you as the reader? Why?