

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MALCOLM X: INTERROGATING THE POLITICAL SELF OF MALCOLM X

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Malcolm X, along with Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., represents the two political principles of the African-American race politics that operated in the late 1950s and 1960s. The two leaders share an almost common timeline. Both of them were born in the heydays of the Harlem Renaissance. They both were assassinated in the latter half of the 1960s bringing the Civil Rights Movement to a premature end. As much as Martin Luther King Jr. was endorsed by the establishment in life and in death, Malcolm X's radicalism was seen as a festering wound that was pernicious for the race relations of the American society. Martin Luther King Jr. has been glorified into a national symbol of peace, freedom, non-violence and justice in the face of oppression that exists. His political self is celebrated as a quintessential spirit of the American national ideals. Malcolm X, on the other hand, is seen as a radical element of the African-American struggle. His political ideas continue to question the dark underbelly of the American experience. In what Manning Marable terms as a "provocative criticism" of white America and the contemporary African-American leadership, Malcolm X became and remains a belligerent voice for the African-American underclass (Marable 2). In my paper here, I would attempt an explanation of Malcolm X's political self as a product of the continued sub-human experience that marks the African American experience. At the same time, my paper will attempt an examination of Malcolm X beyond his political self. Malcolm X's reconfiguration into a cultural icon, a global leader and a reverent disciple is concurrent with the legacy of his radical politics. Anglo-American dehumanizing of the black race was a part of the ideology that operated from the slavery times onward. It continued to validate white supremacy in the twentieth century. In what is seen as a refashioning of the same ideology, blacks in late nineteenth and early twentieth century adopted an assertive political posture in the assertion of Black Nationalism. The idea behind this ideology was to present "a new collective identity" which will counter and resist the racist white society (Gordon Xi). Although several scholars have traced the emergence of Black Nationalism as a political philosophy to the pre-Civil War times, I would like to limit this study in the context of Malcolm X.

In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* written by Malcolm X and Alex Haley, the first instances of Black Nationalist philosophy are evident in the portrayal of Malcolm's parents. Earl and Louise Little are shown to be followers and advocates of Marcus Garvey's political ideology. Malcolm X describes his father as a Garveyian hero with limited resources. He says, "...but still the image of him that made me proudest was his crusading and militantly campaigning with the words of Marcus Garvey" (Haley 84). Malcolm's family was one of the many who had to negotiate racial injustice and violence of the white supremacist organizations

on everyday basis. Little family's political association with Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) had its immediate consequences. Earl Little was murdered and the rest of the family spent days of poverty, hunger, and physical and mental instability. The violence experienced by Malcolm X in his childhood perhaps convinced him of the ineffectiveness of non-violence as a solution to the race problem in America. It was this systematic subjugation that percolated into the formation of his political idea. Oppression, injustice, militancy, anger and alienation are the central tropes that define this separatist black ideology of Black Nationalism. Garvey's slogans of "Up you mighty race" and "Back to Africa" were radical statements of black pride, geographical separatism, abhorrence of white American society, self-respect and idealness of black race (Cone 13). Garvey's base of supporters usually comprised of rural poor black and ghetto working class. Garvey believed that black identity had to be self-determined and it should not seek mainstream approval of its image. It was within the ambit of this understanding precisely that Garvey objurgated integrationist approach. Marcus Garvey's articulation of American experience almost resonates with Malcolm X's perspective. Race solidarity, self-confidence, and a shared dream of nation building defined the contours of their actions. Malcolm seems to have developed his racial consciousness in the context of Garveyian nationalism. Malcolm defines his identity in resistance to the hegemonic forces of America. In the adoption of the "X" letter as his last name, his determination to cast off the American lineage is largely evident.

Malcolm X's autobiography explores the dark underbelly of African-American experience. Crime, desolation, drug-abuse, moral and economic corruption accompany the larger theme of racism. The poignancy of Malcolm X's speeches and his autobiography is alleviated by the fact that his articulation of an underclass black youth's life-experiences that was a common destiny shared by what James Baldwin calls "...any black cat in this curious place and time" (Marable 8). Malcolm recalls his childhood as "nightmare" in his autobiography (Haley 82). In what he terms as "thoroughly integrated life" in the American North, Malcolm shared his schooling experiences with other white children and hence was made racially conscious at a very early age (Haley 83). An incident with his English teacher in school subdued his enthusiasm of living the integrated life. This incident uncovers the deep penetration of the white supremacist psyche in north too. The pretense of the society as a whole to have come out of the racial stereotyping is unearthed in the very aptly called chapter "Mascot" (Haley 103). Although, at this age, Malcolm could not articulate his anti-white consciousness, the sub-human treatment received at the Swerlins makes him restless enough to seek his own kind. In Boston, he again identifies with "town ghetto section" and develops a deep contempt for the middle class blacks whom he calls "hill elite" (Haley 143). This contempt of the middle class finds its extreme manifestation later in his life in the form of his utter rejection of the integrationist principle and the Civil Rights movement leadership associated with it. For him, the integrationist approach kowtows the white hegemonic structures for what should be otherwise seen as natural citizenship rights. This sense of alienation that remains embedded in the black underclass life is perhaps tapped by the Nation of Islam leadership in their propagation of Black Nationalism and simultaneous rejection of the white society all together.

Malcolm X's adherence to the principles of Black Nationalism is genuinely reflected in his acceptance of the Nation of Islam. Malcolm's personal engagement with Islam was a deeply committed affair. Primarily, he perceives Islam as the "natural religion for the black man" (Haley 276). The world that he experiences is a part of the religion that he accepts. It allowed "the Negro in the mud" to seek for transformation and redemption rather than dooming himself to a

peripheral existence in life and in death (Haley 283). The Nation of Islam, combined with the ideas of Black Nationalism provided the much needed collective space for the poor blacks. Their experience of religious freedom which Christianity promised had been proven to be a farce in the real world. The Nation of Islam not only affirmed the personhood of the black people but most importantly, it validated the cultural identity of the black race. It provided religious justification to the idea of distancing between the races, and saw both, cultural and geographical separation as the only possible solution to the race problem. In its subversive portrayal, whiteness became the colour of the devil. In the early phase of his transformation, Malcolm was less involved with the spiritual part of the religion and more governed by the objective realities of African American existence. His rejection of Christianity was not based on any intellectual doctrinal reasoning but out of rejective zeal which denounced the sheer sub-human treatment that was accorded to the blacks in a white Christian society (Cone 168). In the autobiography, it is the Bible that provides Malcolm X with the primary narrative and symbolic resources. At the same time, it will be reductive to not to attribute the Nation of Islam's teachings in Malcolm's self-reformation and self-education. Malcolm's intellectual growth happened within this overarching influence of the Nation of Islam and Elijah Muhammad. Their influence determined the trajectory of Malcolm's thought. Several scholars have seen this adherence to the principles of the Nation of Islam for the sexist undercurrent in Malcolm's ideas. The patriarchal regime under which the Nation of Islam functioned determined Malcolm's personal life as well as his general attitude towards the role of women. The Black Nationalist philosophy had long insisted on the assertiveness of the black male. For Malcolm, it was racism that was to be seen as the primary political concern. Along with other African-American male leaders, Malcolm too could not perceive the underlying connection between the two issues. However Malcolm's revision of many of his political ideas after dissociation with the Nation of Islam perhaps provides a speculative scope of a changed attitude on the women issues.

It is at the idea of justice and it's constituent that Malcolm is perceived to be diagonally opposite to the ideas of Martin Luther King Jr. In the autobiography, Malcolm X sees a violent end to America as a community. His God is revengeful rather than forgiving. On the other hand, Martin Luther King's sees non-violence as a way of life with appropriate amalgamation of the Christian concepts of Love, Truth and justice. King's methods didn't dehumanise the oppressor but the oppression, not the sinner but the sin. Martin Luther king was apprehensive about every detail of the political movement which might have brought them in the same line of action as his oppressors were. He wanted to assert the 'ethical course of action.' His own dilemma is highlighted when he discusses the idea of 'the means' and 'the ends.' In his book *Stride Toward Freedom*, King argues, "Even if lasting practical results came from such a boycott, would immoral means justify moral ends?" (King 132). For Malcolm, unequivocal devotion to the community of the black people was the primary concern. His Black Muslim theology would allow little scope a possible appeal for a change of heart of the oppressors. His alienation with the frameworks of the western world was complete.

As James H. Cone argues, Martin King and Malcolm X do not share the same means but the same ends. Freedom to King becomes a Christian concept with greater adherence to the concept of Truth. This spiritual concept was not to be seen as a consequence of human actions but something that was already determined by the higher authority of God and the principles of Truth. He advocated unity of the community which will determine the idea of freedom. Separation itself is to be seen as sin. He wanted the African American population to endorse the idea of boycott not only to protest against the external elements i.e. the white society but also to

address the internal demons by using the means of introspection (King 46, 121). Such approach was largely reformist than revolutionary where the means as well as the end were to abide the laws of truth and justice in the given reality of African American existence. At the same time, Martin also realised that integrationist and non-violent approach was not only the viable means but a pragmatic solution to achieve freedom. James H. Cone quotes a *Playboy* interview in which Dr. King remarked:

Even the extremist leaders who preach revolution are invariably unwilling to lead what they know would certainly end in bloody, chaotic and total defeat; for in the event of a violent revolution, we would be sorely outnumbered. And when it was all over, the Negro would face the same unchanged conditions, the same squalor and deprivation-the only difference being that his bitterness would be even more intense, his disenchantment even more abject. Thus, in purely practical as well as moral terms, the American Negro has no alternative to nonviolence (Cone 266).

Malcolm's idea of freedom was limited to the immediate achievement of social, economic and political justice. His means to achieve freedom included a total abandonment of the Western world and its ideologies. Geographical independence and allegiance to the Third World countries could have given the possible black nation where blackness was no longer a sub-human attribute. The form of violence that he himself suffered and saw his own kind suffering was reflected in the image of the white American society that he carried to the end. The idea of self-defense was his "religious axe", a commitment he made to his community and religion (Haley 347). Although King towards the later period of his political life shows an apparent leaning towards Malcolm's separatist disposition; his response was much altered because of the rise of Black Power movement and the failure on the part of the white society in the implementation of authentic integration. At the same time king recognized the limitations of this approach. He saw it interfering with his fundamental principles of non-violence and integration. Interestingly enough it was James Baldwin- the public intellectual, who strikes the intermediary note between the two philosophies. Baldwin did not approve of the separation of the races. Even in the face of the rage and bitterness that racism had long sustained, Baldwin had willingness toward peace and reconciliation (Pfeffer). However, Baldwin was seen as a radical by many followers of Dr. King. His 1964 play *Blues for Mister Charlie* ended with a preacher going to the pulpit with a gun in one hand and a Bible in the other, and the preacher says, "I've got the Bible and the gun, one of these is going to work." Baldwin did not talk about the struggle for "black rights" or "civil rights" but rather he talked about "human rights." Baldwin reflected the hope and potential for change that Dr. King expressed, but he also reflected the anger and despair that Malcolm X articulated. He recognized that the image of "field Negro" was essential for the existence of the idea of "house Negro" (Pfeffer).

After publically declaring his repudiation of the Nation of Islam Malcolm revisited many of his ideas. His separatist approach, self-defense and self-love remained his uncompromising principles. However, the binary of White and Black vis-a-vis evil and good that the Nation of Islam withstood for was given up for good. Malcolm was now mentally prepared for an engaging relationship with the civil rights movement and the Third World. As James H. Cones notes, Malcolm's changing names also correspond with his ever-transforming identity. Hajj journey to Mecca provided him the much needed theological purification. He adopted a new name of El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. Malcolm states in his autobiography, "My Pilgrimage broadened my

scope. It blessed me with a new insight” (Haley 455). Thus, he repudiates Elijah Muhammad’s parochial version of Islam as a part of this growing religious consciousness. Malcolm was prepared to broaden his political outlook to the higher order of a global leader and a human rights activist. His setting up of two organizations confirms his divided self. The Muslim Mosque, Inc., which clearly had religious objectives, while the Organization of Afro-American Unity was a political set up that focused upon the unity of the race and had overt political agendas.

Malcolm’s autobiography has very often been questioned regarding the relationship that an autobiography has with its author. Alex Gillespie terms this autobiography as a “conversion narrative and a metamorphosis narrative” (Gillespie 28). The trope that is used here is that of a successive period of reformation after every debacle or moral degradation. Thus, the breakaway from the Nation of Islam is not seen as another transformation but it becomes a part of the continuity that the text develops throughout. Malcolm uses the metaphor of darkness and light, brainwashing and awakening from sleep to emphasize a moral authority that he has acquired now by transcending the former self. The autobiography seems appropriated to resemble the structure of a bildungsroman. Incidents are selective and always focused on the individual. Larger events of Malcolm X’s contemporary world such as the Great Depression, World War II, and the Civil Rights Movement are mentioned in passing. His retrospective journey or what Alex Gillespie calls “reconstitutive moment” also becomes a validating articulation of his experience in the context of the ideologies that he presently affirms to (Gillespie 30).

Malcolm’s ability to consistently seek transformation perhaps makes him relevant with the contemporary readers and followers too. His denouncement of the American society, his uncompromising pursuit of justice for the underclass and his relentless criticism of acquiescent black leadership remained a part of his life-long political and religious activism. For Malcolm, a united African-American community was the prerequisite for fighting the other. His embracement of blackness continues to inspire the contemporary African-American youth. His political and spiritual legacy perhaps lies in this ability to seek an internal transformation before facing the oppressive structures. His ability to envisage a commonality between the Third world and the African-American community enabled him to address the issues through the ideas of human rights in the later part of his political career.

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