

Shape Shifting: The Evolution of El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz

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The name Malcolm X is one of the most recognizable names in modern American history. Still, there is a singular view of him portrayed in the works of most African American scholars. Many of us know him as the fiery, militant, by-any-means-necessary, angry Negro or in comparison to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as the radical complement to King's nonviolent advocacy. Works that concentrate on him as a Black intellectual only narrow their scope to the persona of Malcolm X, often dismissively mentioning the other phases of his life as just that – phases. While there are works that will acknowledge the fact that all his life experiences have played a part in molding his philosophy, there isn't an extensive study of each persona of the person commonly known as Malcolm X. I intend to look at each of these faces of Malcolm not only to find the differences, but also to find the common thread in them all – that each was conscious of his condition, and always sought the means to resist, that there is some of the intellectual that is we come to know in Malcolm X in all of his other adopted personalities, and it is this common thread that allowed for his complete evolution.

He was born Malcolm Little on May 19, 1925 to Louise Little and Reverend Earl Little, who was an outspoken Baptist minister and follower of the teachings of Marcus Garvey. However, his father's outspoken nature led to the constant harassment of his family by the Black Legion and his father's subsequent murder, allegedly by that same group. Still, after the trauma he suffered due to intimidation by the Black Legion, his father's death, and his family's split, he still grew up as a bright, industrious child. Nevertheless, he came face to face with society's expectation of him to grow up to

become the good nigger, for whom being a dishwasher, or carpenter was a good career choice. In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, he recalls having the response of his teacher when he mentioned wanting to become a lawyer:

“ Mr. Ostrowski looked surprised, I remember, and leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. He kind of half-smiled and said, ‘Malcolm, one of life’s first needs is for us to be realistic. Don’t misunderstand me, now. We all are here like you, you know that. But you’ve got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer – that’s no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about something you *can* be. You’re good with your hands - making things. Everybody admires your carpentry shop work. Why don’t you plan on carpentry? People like you as a person – you’d get all kinds of work.’”¹”

Malcolm then went on to state that, it was then that he began to change inside, hence, his first stage of evolution.

What Malcolm then changed into was Detroit Red. After spending some time working in Boston, Massachusetts, he moved to Harlem where he committed a series of petty crimes. He had become the other persona of the Negro – not the shuffling, subservient, good nigger, but the one who, “disdaining boot-blackening and carpentry, approaches society at its weak spot for guilty joys and titillation,²” hence, the ghetto life, the hustler’s life that Red became so entrenched in while in Harlem. His choice of this lifestyle was his first act of rebellion against the status quo that oppressed African-Americans and that still oppresses them today. His choice of this lifestyle as Detroit Red

¹Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1964) p. 38

²Charles Alva Hoyt, “The Five Faces of Malcolm X,” *Negro American Literature Forum*, Vol. 4, No. 4. (Winter, 1970) p. 109

was his first statement of defiance, not his advocacy post- his evolution into the persona of Malcolm X.

Even before Malcolm X was another stage of his evolution. When he was arrested in 1946 and sentenced to ten years in prison, there was another shift in his persona which was part of his growth as a Black intellectual. About his prison experience, he writes, “I would pace for hours like a caged leopard, viciously cursing aloud to myself...Eventually, the men in the cellblock had a name for me: ‘Satan.’”³ The choice of name was interesting, in that it was the name often given to Negroes by whites in order to justify slavery. The Black man was a satanic brute, deserving of his subservient condition. Nancy Clasby, in her article, “The Autobiography of Malcolm X: A Mythic Paradigm,” states that he entered prison “a motiveless shell of a person⁴,” who, as Charles Hoyt states “was restored to humanity by the Nation of Islam.⁵” However, I beg to differ. Even though he had denounced God, and seemed to hit rock bottom, he was still in constant dialogue with the concept of religion, and in his new persona, still thought about and defied his social condition, by doing seemingly meaningless things such as throwing things out of his cell, dropping his tray in the dining hall and refusing to answer to his number. The persona of Satan, therefore, should not be regarded in writings as an empty shell, but should be more carefully studied as a facet of the intellectual that became Malcolm X. Had it not been for his constant dialogue with religion, he would not have readily accepted Islam.

³ Hoyt, “The Five Faces of Malcolm X,” *Negro American Literature Forum*, Vol. 4, No. 4. (Winter, 1970) p. 110

⁴ Nancy Clasby, “The Autobiography of Malcolm X: A Mythic Paradigm,” *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1. (Sep., 1974) p. 24

⁵ Hoyt, “The Five Faces of Malcolm X,” *Negro American Literature Forum*, Vol. 4, No. 4. (Winter, 1970) p. 111

Then we come to the best known persona, the one who comes into being after accepting Islam – Malcolm X. He is the one who is often pitted intellectually against Dr. King (often in a manner that has been overly dramatized by the media). He strongly encourages self defense and scoffs at the idea of nonviolent resistance. His philosophy of self defense and the use of any means necessary to preserve one’s freedom are akin to Franz Fanon’s call for total revolution in order to shatter the binary opposition of blackness and whiteness. He was resolute and uncompromising, and as such, was feared by whites because he was far off from the good nigger persona, but was no longer the Satan persona whose incarceration could be justified. It was in this mode that he came to be known as an intellectual, and that his actions, whether admired, feared or despised, came to be studied with great interest. Still, while he remained uncompromising in what he was fighting for, he was also open to other persons and ideas that would allow him to grow as a thinker. Evidence of this openness can be seen in his never denouncing the validity of Dr. King and his willingness to travel and have a wide array of experiences. This same openness to dialogue carried over from his former Satan persona, and was reason he was able to choose to leave the Nation of Islam and to come closer to Dr. King’s position, while still maintaining many of his ideas about strong resistance, and while remaining true to Islam.

His trip to Mecca was the catharsis for his final phase of his evolution - the one that led to the birth of El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. The pilgrimage to Mecca was what brought him to the awareness that the real enemy was an international power structure that grew out of a certain epistemology. “It’s the American political, economic and social

atmosphere that automatically nourishes a racist psychology in the white man.⁶”

Although his world view did not change in a way that allowed him to completely accept white allies, nor did it change his expectation of violent struggle, the change he experienced was profound. While in Mecca, he truly felt as though he stood before Allah as a human being, and this experience, while extremely personal, allowed him to really see the world outside of America. He saw the differences between America and non-Americans, but at the same time, was able to find a sense of unity among African-Americans and Africans from the continent. His experience of seeing this difference while finding this sense of unity is best summed up in this quote:

“I reflected many, many times to myself upon how the American Negro has been entirely brainwashed from ever seeing... himself as a part of the non-white peoples of the world. The American Negro has no conception of the hundreds of millions of other non-whites’ concern for him: he has no conception of their feeling of brotherhood for and with him.⁷”

But, there was still a change in his attitude towards whites in America. Speaking to Alex Haley on his return from Mecca, he states, “I have adjusted my thinking to the point where I believe that whites are human beings. . . as long as this is borne out by their humane attitude toward Negroes.⁸” According to Hoyt, it was a shame he had to go to Mecca in order to change his thinking, however, the fact remains that he did, and that he could not have reached this viewpoint as a thinker overnight, especially considering his

⁶ Clasby, “The Autobiography of Malcolm X: A Mythic Paradigm,” *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1. (Sep., 1974) p. 30

⁷ Clasby, “The Autobiography of Malcolm X: A Mythic Paradigm,” *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1. (Sep., 1974) p. 31

⁸ Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1964) p. 420

own life experiences. I believe that he chose the best route to grow as an intellectual, by simply living his life and learning from each experience, and absence of this acknowledgement in writings about Shabazz is what the real shame is, not the fact that he appeared to broaden his horizons too little too late.

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