

THE ROLE OF ISLAM IN THE FORMATION OF MALCOLM X'S IDENTITY AND THOUGHTS

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Abstract

This study analyses the role of Islam in the formation of Malcolm X's identity and thoughts. Focusing on his moral foundation and evolving beliefs, particularly in theology and politics, this research seeks to elucidate the role of Islam in shaping Malcolm X's worldview and serving as a moral foundation in his sentiments. The research methodology employed in this study is a qualitative approach with a historical research design. Data collection involves the use of documentation methods and the gathered data are analysed using historical analysis. As a result, the study findings reveal that despite challenging circumstances, Malcolm X successfully emerged from moral decay, discovering a renewed sense of purpose through Islam. Notably, Islam's principles of justice and equality resonated with Malcolm X. The religion's clear stance on racial matters captivated him, aligning with his pursuit of equality. In essence, Malcolm X's comprehension of Islam significantly contributed to the evolution of his ideas concerning identity, racial dynamics and justice in the American context. The study emphasises how Islam became a transformative force in Malcolm X's life, shaping his vision for a more equitable and just society.

Keyword: *Islam, Malcolm X, identity, thoughts*

Introduction

Malcolm X was a prominent African American leader and influential figure in the American civil rights movement during the mid-20th century. Malcolm X's thoughts and life story have been instrumental in driving societal changes especially for American Muslims and African Americans. Malcolm X's life and work have transcended beyond its initial socio-political context. He contextualized the struggles of Black Americans globally, framing them as part of a broader fight against oppression. His public life and civil rights activism continue to resonate, especially among discontented young individuals. Malcolm X's enduring influence lies in his ability to articulate a vision of a just and equitable society, inspiring successive generations to engage with these transformative ideals.¹

Malcolm X's vision, advocacy and legacy were profoundly shaped by his life experiences, which spanned from a challenging upbringing to a transformative spiritual journey. Islam had a profound impact on the formation of Malcolm X's identity and thoughts. His conversion to Islam- particularly the Nation of Islam (NOI)- has played a pivotal role in shaping his worldview. NOI is a movement advocating for the rights of Black Americans and promoting Black empowerment that provided Malcolm X with a sense of purpose, pride and a

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¹ Ackfeldt, Anders, and Emin Poljarevic. "The Political Theology of Malcolm X." *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 96, no. 1 (2020), 11.

framework for social justice. It influenced the way he advocated for civil rights and equality, and contributed to his evolving perspectives on race, unity, and resistance against oppression.

Islam, within the context of the NOI, has shaped his resilience, determination and unwavering stance against racial injustice. Malcolm X reached the cornerstone of his worldview and his spiritual journey during his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964. Experiencing the inclusive nature of Islam, where individuals of all races prayed together, challenged his previous separatist views. This transformative experience led him to embrace a more universal and inclusive approach to civil rights by emphasizing the shared humanity of all people. As a result, Islam as interpreted within the NOI and later in a more mainstream Islamic context, played a central role in shaping Malcolm X's identity and thoughts. It provided him with a moral compass, a sense of belonging, and a framework for understanding and challenging the racial inequalities of his time. The influence of Islam in Malcolm X's life is evident in his activism, speeches, and in the evolution of his perspective towards a more inclusive and universal understanding of justice and equality.

This study aims to examine the influence of Islam in shaping Malcolm X's identity and thoughts. The study explores how Islam educated him to break away from separatist views and to raise awareness about human rights struggles through the lens of Tawheed (the oneness of God). The study also emphasizes how Islam provides a moral foundation in Malcolm X's messages and how the spiritual transformation played a crucial role in altering his political perspectives.

The discussion on the role of Islam specifically targets the formation of Malcolm X's identity as a Muslim, examining how he encountered Islam through three phases: before Islam, during his time with the NOI, and while performing the Hajj pilgrimage. The selection of this scope aims to showcase his journey through various phases in life before recognizing the true Islam. The discussion of Malcolm X's thoughts encompasses his political ideology, particularly his advocacy for human rights and opposition to racism. The study also aims to explain Malcolm X's thoughts from the theological perspective to highlight his understanding of religion and God. The study aims to underscore the role of Islam in his life, especially when there are attempts to downplay Islam's role in his movement and erase his identity as a Muslim. Furthermore, the research intends to emphasize how Islam significantly contributes to educating and disciplining Malcolm X and how Islamic principles are vital in understanding the messages he intended to convey.

Aims and Objectives of Research

The primary aim of this research is to comprehensively investigate the role of Islam in shaping the identity and thoughts of Malcolm X, a pivotal figure in American history. The study seeks to unravel the multifaceted layers of Malcolm X's journey, tracing his early life experiences, examining the factors that led to his conversion to Islam, and analyzing the evolution of his religious beliefs. By delving into the intersection of Islam and Malcolm X's political and racial

perspectives, the research aims to illuminate the profound impact of Islamic teachings on his personal identity.

In order to achieve this aim, the research outlines several specific objectives. First of all, the study will conduct an in-depth review of biographical sources, historical records, and literature related to Malcolm X's life and religious trajectory. Through specific research questions, the research aims to develop a nuanced understanding of the psychological and ideological dimensions of Malcolm X's journey. The study also aims to draw informed conclusions, contributing valuable insights to the academic discourse on the interplay between Malcolm X, Islam, identity and thoughts. Throughout these objectives, the study is committed to maintaining ethical standards, ensuring the respectful and responsible handling of sensitive information related to Malcolm X and his religious journey. This research aspires to shed light on the profound impact of Islam in shaping the identity and thoughts of one of America's most influential figures.

Research Method

The research employed in this study is a qualitative approach. David Silverman describes qualitative research as, "Qualitative research is the type of research that finds out about people's experiences. It helps us understand what is important for people."² In other words, qualitative research focuses on creating meaning to understand and unravel social phenomena. In line with the research objectives, this study utilizes content analysis, comparative analysis, and historical research. These methods are employed to gather all relevant data and references related to the study theme. This approach was selected because it suits the research objectives to reveal how Islam became a transformative force in Malcolm X's life and thoughts. For data collection, the study utilizes biographical research which involves an in-depth examination of his life, experiences, and the various factors that shaped his identity, beliefs, and actions. This type of research delves into the personal history of Malcolm X, exploring key events, relationships, and influences that played a role in his development. Biographical research on Malcolm X aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the man behind the historical figure, shedding light on the complexities, challenges, and growth he experienced throughout his life. This involves searching for secondary data sources such as books, articles, journals, and others. This method is essential to ensure the authenticity of all gathered information, whether related to definitions, history, principles, concepts, and so forth.

After obtaining relevant materials, the researcher examines the materials beforehand to ensure their authority and quality. Once the researcher completes the data and fact collection through the aforementioned methods, the information and content of the literature acquired will be analyzed and examined to identify similarities and differences among data written by various researchers from diverse backgrounds. Given that the research design utilizes a qualitative approach, the study employs content and comparative analysis that commences with

² David Silverman, ed. *Qualitative research*, (2020), 3.

observations (formation of Malcolm X's identity and Islam as a paradigm shift in reshaping Malcolm X's thoughts), and theories are formulated towards the conclusion of the research process based on these observations.³ In other words, this involves using a set of collected information and seeking connections with other available data. This process yields general conclusions based on the same principles as specific data. It aims to construct theories by observing specific phenomena that can be generalized into general theories. The researcher organizes the collected data according to patterns before constructing theories as the finding of the study. The process begins with the collection of data predetermined by the researcher through objectives and research questions that are guided.⁴

Theoretical Framework (Understanding the Concept of Identity and Thoughts)

Before delving deeper into the role of Islam in the formation of Malcolm X's identity and thoughts, it is necessary to make clear the theoretical viewpoint of identity and thoughts in this context of research. It is crucial to recognize that there are two main types of identity: social and personal. Social identity involves attributing a sense of similarity to an individual based on their relationships with others, while personal identity is how an individual defines their own sense of similarity. Typically, social identity includes being a recognizable member of a group, achieved or ascribed, or having a distinct character or role recognized by others. While individuals can actively shape their social identity, it is the categorization and attribution by others that centralizes one's social identity. This differs from personal identity, where stability in oneself is perceived regardless of others' perceptions. Social identity relies more on others than on self; hence, it can exist without personal awareness.⁵

According to John Barresi, the materials out of which an individual forms a personal identity are the social identities that he or she has experienced in the past and will continue to experience throughout life. However, on a more concrete level we create a personal identity out of memories of events in our own life and the lives of those around us. These events, as experienced, are dramatic scenes. The way we organize these scenes is by scripts, and ultimately narrative, which find common themes in diverse events. But the task of making sense of our lives by unifying these experiences, scripts, and social identities and projecting them into the future is not easy. Thus, typically, constructing a personal identity through self-narrative involves the working through of dialogical relationships between different perspectives or voices within us, and in others, which are always in dynamic equilibrium with each other throughout our lives. Achieving a uniquely individual personal voice and narrative requires becoming masters of our lives, becoming increasingly aware of who we are and how we came to be, then striking a balance between emotions and motivations laid down early in

³ Goddard, Wayne, and Stuart Melville. *Research methodology: An introduction*. Juta and Company Ltd, 2004.

⁴ Aizan Binti Ali @ Mat Zin, *Metodologi Penyelidikan Sejarah Islam*, (Kuala Lumpur, Institut Terjemahan dan Buku Malaysia, 2022),74.

⁵ Barresi, J. (2006). *The Identities of Malcolm X*. American Psychological Association, 201-202.

our lives and setting goals for the future commensurate with the way we and the world around us are developing.⁶

Meanwhile, the concept of identity formation, according to Foubert and Grainger, encompasses aspects of behavior and attitudes in terms of an individual's psychology, interpersonal relationships, and physicality.⁷ Stuart Hall explains that identity is related to the politics of location, issues of identification, the use of historical, linguistic, and cultural sources in the process of becoming an individual, as well as power dynamics and defense mechanisms. Each member of society usually undergoes the process of forming their own and collective identities representing their gender, social class, ethnic group, and nationality.⁸ From a sociological perspective, identity formation involves three ways: First is individual awareness, where an individual thinks about the behavior they should adopt. Second is daily interaction, where individuals learn various forms of behavior such as societal norms, social systems, laws, religion, and more through daily interactions. Individuals gradually form their identity based on adjusting to the input obtained from their interactions with the environment. Third is unconscious ways, where identity formation may occur unconsciously, influenced by natural factors that determine an individual's behavior, such as dreams or the will of Allah S.W.T. Based on this explanation, identity formation here refers to the development and building of an individual's personality involving how one perceives oneself by taking environmental perspectives into account.⁹

Thoughts, on the other hand, generally refers to conscious cognitive processes that can happen independently of sensory stimulation.¹⁰ Their most paradigmatic forms are judging, reasoning, concept formation, problem solving, and deliberation. But other mental processes, like considering an idea, memory, or imagination, are also often included. The term "thought" can also be used to refer not to the mental processes themselves but to mental states or systems of ideas brought about by these processes.¹¹ In this context, they are sometimes interchangeable with the term "belief" and its related terms. It may also refer to the mental states or sets of ideas that these cognitive processes generate. These mental states can either belong to an individual or be shared among a specific group of people.¹² In this study, two main aspects of thoughts will be covered in this study: theological and political. The purpose of these aspects of thoughts is to explore Malcolm X's intellectual journey in religious and spiritual beliefs. It also aims to

⁶ Barresi, J. (2006). *The Identities of Malcolm X*, 202-205.

⁷ Osman, Zamimah, Marini Kasim, Farah Mohamad Zain, Nur Hafizah Ismail, and Farah Nadia Mohd Faudzi. "Pembentukan identiti sendiri pelajar universiti: Perbandingan pelajar tahun pertama dengan pelajar tahun akhir." *Jurnal Pembangunan Sosial* 24 (2021): 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.32890/jps2021.24.1>

⁸Rofil, Lily El Ferawati, Md Azalanshah Md Syed, and Azizah Hamzah. "Jadi Melayu": Televisyen dan pembentukan identiti wanita keturunan Jawa di Malaysia." *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication* 31, no. 1 (2015): 41-58.

⁹ Nasir, Muhamad Nadhir Abdul, and Rosila Bee Mohd Hussain. "Permasalahan Identiti: Penilaian Konsep Defisit Identiti dan Konflik Identiti." *SARJANA* 29, no. 2 (2014): 44-55.

¹⁰ Breyer, Thiemo; Gutland, Christopher (2015). "Introduction". *Phenomenology of Thinking: Philosophical Investigations into the Character of Cognitive Experiences*. pp. 1-24.

¹¹ "[The American Heritage Dictionary entry: thought](https://www.ahdictionary.com/entry/entry_thought.html)". *www.ahdictionary.com*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing. Retrieved 14 December 2023.

¹²Mandelbaum, Eric (2014). "[Thinking is Believing](https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2014.858417)". *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*. 57 (1): 55-96. [doi:10.1080/0020174X.2014.858417](https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2014.858417). [S2CID 52968342](https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2014.858417).

delve into how it played a crucial role in transforming his political perspective from separatist to inclusive, seeking justice and equality globally.

Formation of Malcolm X's Identity

Every human being possesses an identity that serves as a connection to seek existence in a society. Identity develops according to the environment and responds to the phenomena around them. Islam plays a crucial role in Malcolm's life process, contributing to the reconstruction of his identity and the development of Malcolm X's personality. Islam has enriched his life and identity, as expressed in his autobiography: "In my 39 years on this earth, the Holy City of Mecca had been the first time I had ever stood before the Creator of All and felt like a complete human being."¹³

Therefore, in this following part of the research, the study will explore Malcolm X's life from the perspective of his spiritual journey and the process of identity formation. The process of forming Malcolm X's identity as a Muslim is divided into three phases: First, his identity as Malcolm Little. Second, Malcolm's identity as Malcolm X. Third, Malcolm's identity as El-Malik El-Shabbaz.

Identity As Malcolm Little

Malcolm Little was born on May 19, 1925, in Omaha, Nebraska.¹⁴ Malcolm bore witness to racism from the beginning. His father, a civil rights activist and Baptist minister, moved the family several times during Malcolm's childhood in response to threats from the Black Legion, a White supremacist organization. Malcolm was also raised in a Christian environment and the Marcus Garvey movement¹⁵. The Little family embraced Garveyite principles which advocated for Black liberation from White oppression. Raised by parents involved in the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA),¹⁶ Malcolm often attended Baptist church services where his father preached as a visiting minister.

After Malcolm's father was murdered, his family suffered in poverty and became disconnected. As Malcolm's mother's mental health deteriorated, she was placed in a mental institution by the authorities. Eventually, Malcolm was placed under the foster care of a White

¹³ Malcolm X., Alex Haley, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 2015), 372.

¹⁴ Recep Şentürk, *Malcolm X: The Struggle for Human Rights*. Translated by Cyrus McGoldrick (United Kingdom: Claritas Books, 2019), 22.

¹⁵ Marcus Mosiah Garvey (1887–1940) was a Jamaican political activist. He was the founder and first President-General of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL, commonly known as UNIA), through which he declared himself Provisional President of Africa. Ideologically a Black nationalist and Pan-Africanist, his ideas came to be known as Garveyism.

¹⁶ Recep Şentürk, *Malcolm X*, 23.

couple, the Gohannas, who took a liking to him and whom, in return, Malcolm tried to please.¹⁷ In the process, Malcolm surrendered his Black identity and tried to become White. In seventh grade, he was elected president and became deluded by his apparent success both in academics and popularity. He mentioned in his autobiography: "I was proud (of being elected). I'm not going to say I wasn't. In fact, by then, I didn't really have much feeling about being a Negro, because I was trying so hard, in every way I could, to be White".¹⁸ But the source of pride in his new personal identity did not last. His pride and confidence were shattered by his English teacher, Mr Ostrowski. His response to Malcolm's comment that he would like to become a lawyer:

*"Mr Ostrowski looked surprised...He kind of smiled and said, "Malcolm, one of life's first needs is to be realistic. Don't misunderstand me now. We all here like you, you know that. But you've got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer-that's not realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about something you can be. You're good with your hands-making things..Why don't you plan on carpentry?"*¹⁹

Malcolm lost interest in school and decided to abandon the illusion of becoming White and moved to Boston. Malcolm's Christian upbringing continued in Boston, where he navigated the temptations of nightclubs, alcohol, and free association while remaining devout. However, upon moving to Harlem for work, his faith wavered. Goodheart identified this phase of Malcolm's life as involving a negative identity.²⁰ He immersed himself in a lifestyle that contradicted Christian values. Feeling unrestricted and uninhibited by religion, ethics, or laws, he engaged in various sinful activities without guilt such as robbery, murder, gambling, drugs, and adultery.

Malcolm's six years term in prison from 1946 to 1952²¹ marked a crucial phase in the development of his identity. It saw him evolve from a troubled individual, battling addictions, possessing minimal education, and harbouring a defeatist mindset, into a self-educated and religious believer. When Malcolm entered prison, he grappled with self-destructive behaviour, including drug use, frequent solitary confinement, and hostility toward God and religion.²² This outlook led fellow inmates to dub him 'Satan'.²³ He adopted an atheistic stance, rejecting organized religion due to its failure to prevent his incarceration and address racial injustices. The catalyst for Malcolm's profound change was his introduction to Islam through the teachings of the Nation of Islam (NOI). Embracing NOI provided Malcolm with a renewed sense of purpose, instilled pride and offered a framework for advocating Black empowerment and social justice. Malcolm's transformative journey shifted his self-hatred and anger with God.

¹⁷ Malcolm X., Alex Haley, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 26.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁰ Barresi, J., *The Identities of Malcolm X*, 209.

²¹ Abdat, Fathie Bin Ali. "Malcolm X and Christianity." Master's Thesis, National University of Singapore, 2009., 28.

²² Hostility toward God and religion here suggests Malcolm's negative or antagonistic attitude or feeling towards the concepts of God and organized religion at that time. This sentiment may manifest in various ways, such as skepticism, disbelief, criticism, or even active opposition.

²³ Recep Şentürk, *Malcolm X: The Struggle for Human Right*, 81.

It transformed into a new form of resentment directed at the ‘White devil’²⁴ or the White race, as depicted in NOI's origin myth, where all Whites were considered devils.²⁵ Malcolm's fellow inmate, Bimbi, also played a pivotal role in guiding him. Recognizing Malcolm's intellectual potential, Bimbi mentored him on harnessing his capacities positively. In essence, his prison years became a crucible for self-discovery, paving the way for his emergence as a staunch advocate for racial justice and empowerment within the framework of Islam.²⁶

Identity As Malcolm X

Following his release from prison in 1952, Malcolm X became a protégé of Elijah Muhammad, the NOI leader. Under Muhammad's guidance, Malcolm adopted the surname "X" replacing Little, with an X to indicate that his own family name and identity had been lost when his ancestors were brought to America as slaves.²⁷ Malcolm ascended rapidly within the NOI; starting off as an assistant minister for the NOI in Detroit, and shortly thereafter head minister in Boston. In 1954, he was head of several temples that he organised on the East Coast, and he also became head minister in Harlem, a position he held until 1963. In 1957, he became the national representative of the NOI, until 1963.²⁸ Malcolm's success can be attributed to his ability to resonate with the public, especially the lower class through his speeches and oratory skills. He possessed the talent to interact with people from diverse backgrounds, whether educated or not. By sharing examples from his own life, Malcolm could connect and engage with the community because had a deep understanding of his preaching audience as he personally had gone through similar spiritually constrained circumstances.²⁹

In 1962, Malcolm X founded a newspaper published by the Nation of Islam called ‘*Muhammad Speaks*’.³⁰ The newspaper disseminated international and local news, as well as useful information related to health, education, history, and political developments. As a result, the Nation of Islam movement rapidly gained popularity among the Black community and began to attract international attention. During his involvement with the NOI, he also made efforts to combat drug abuse among the Black community. Together with the NOI, Malcolm X employed effective strategies to protect its members from drug abuse. His endeavors drew significant attention to the NOI and attracted many individuals to embrace Islam.³¹

²⁴ Wallace D. Fard, the founder of the NOI movement, taught that the Black people were the original race on earth and the White race was created later by the cursed scientist Yakub in order to rule over the Black people. They believe Whites are a biologically inferior, satanic race of “blue eyed devils” and oppose racial integration.

²⁵ Recep Şentürk, *Malcolm X: The Struggle for Human Right*, 83.

²⁶ Barresi, J. (2006). *The Identities of Malcolm X*, 210-213.

²⁷ Recep Şentürk, *Malcolm X: The Struggle for Human Right*, 45.

²⁸ Barresi, J. (2006). *The Identities of Malcolm X*, 213.

²⁹ Recep Şentürk, *Malcolm X: The Struggle for Human Right*, 30.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 51-52.

³¹ Sidik Fauji. "Kebijakan Elijah Muhammad pada Gerakan Nation of Islam (NoI) dalam Memperjuangkan Etnis Afro-Amerika di Amerika Serikat." *Resolusi: Jurnal Sosial Politik* 2, no. 1 (2019): 55-73.

Throughout his decade as a minister in the NOI, Malcolm played an essential role in the organization's swift growth and elevated its visibility nationally and internationally. Engaging in political endeavors on behalf of Black Americans, both within and beyond the NOI, Malcolm's 10 year tenure proved instrumental in shaping him into a distinctive advocate within the civil rights movements. It played an important role in molding his resilience, determination, and steadfast commitment against racial injustice.

After the assassination of John F. Kennedy in Texas, Malcolm made a notable remark about “chickens coming home to roost,”³² suggesting that the repercussions of American violence on a global scale had now reached its own leader. As he had been previously told by Elijah Muhammad to not make any comment about Kennedy’s death, Malcolm was temporarily suspended from the NOI by Elijah Muhammad. Eventually, Malcolm’s enemies in the organisation convinced Elijah to get rid of Malcolm, despite his personal dedication to Elijah, However, Malcolm also began to lose his faith in Elijah when it became obvious to him that he fathered a number of children with his private secretaries, which was against the moral code of the NOI.³³

It is important to note that Malcolm’s wavering faith in Elijah was not sudden or based solely on the indefensible act of Elijah. During his time in NOI, he encountered several Muslims outside of NOI, which piqued his interest in learning about Islam outside of NOI. However, due to his attachment and belief in Elijah Muhammad, he hardly or never took their advice until after parting ways with the NOI, when he began reconsidering the truth of the organisation’s teachings.

Identity As El-Hajj, Malik al-Shabazz

Although Malcolm formally left the organisation in 1964, the suspension made by Elijah effectively terminated Malcolm's role within the NOI. As he realized the impossibility of reinstatement and the ominous threat accompanied from other leaders for his harm, Malcolm departed from the NOI in March 1964. He then formed his own religious organisation, the Muslim Mosque, Inc. (MMI), aspiring to find acceptance as a member and minister within the true Islam, a path he was gradually exploring and understanding. After losing faith in Elijah and his teachings, Malcolm also began to engage in religious dialogues with several Muslims outside of NOI, including his sister, Ella. His sister was initially involved with the NOI, but she later left and converted to Sunni Islam.³⁴

In 1964, Malcolm X made a trip to the Middle East to make his Hajj (pilgrimage) in Mecca. This proved to be an exceptionally fulfilling personal journey for Malcolm, as it not only reaffirmed his religious commitment to Islam but also bestowed upon him a new

³² Malcolm X., Alex Haley, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 307.

³³ *Ibid.*, 305.

³⁴ Barresi, J. (2006). *The Identities of Malcolm X*, 216.

humanistic perspective on society.³⁵ Witnessing the inclusive nature of Islam, which embraces people from various racial backgrounds including White people, coexisting without racism, instilled in him a practical vision and understanding of the possibility of a non-racist society. Returning to the United States with a revitalized identity as El Hajj Malik al-Shabazz, Malcolm gained an enriched understanding of his individuality and the broader social identity of African Americans. His vision became less separatist and more humanitarian, outlining a path for positive change in the United States. However, the strides he made in embracing a new, non-racist social and political identity were tragically cut short due to his untimely death in February 1965.³⁶

Islam As A Paradigm Shift In Reshaping Malcolm X's Thoughts

Theological Thinking

Malcolm was raised in a Christian environment and the Marcus Garvey movement. He often attended Baptist church services where his father preached as a visiting Baptist minister. The Little family embraced Garveyite principles, advocating for Black liberation from White oppression. After Malcolm's father was murdered, his mother introduced him to various Christian denominations, such as the Seventh Day Adventist Church and the Jehovah Witnesses, influenced by the teachings of Marcus Garvey.³⁷

Malcolm's disillusionment with Christianity began during his imprisonment from 1946 to 1952. In prison, he gained the nickname "Satan" for his outspoken denial of anything related to God and religion. He responded disrespectfully to his brother Philbert's letter informing him that church members would pray for his release, expressing his disinterest in their prayers.³⁸ He adopted an atheistic stance, rejecting Christianity due to its failure to prevent his unfair imprisonment and address racial injustices. Malcolm's loss of faith in Christianity was intensified by the reality of White dominance within the Christian religion. He was initially drawn to Christianity by preachers promoting justice, equality, and brotherhood, but he found that in reality, no one practiced these principles. Christianity preached equality before God, yet Malcolm's family was expelled and betrayed by White supremacist Christian groups like the Ku Klux Klan and the Black Legion.³⁹

It is essential to note that Malcolm's atheism did not signify a complete loss of belief in religion and God. His inclination towards atheism was driven by contradictions and a gap between Christian theological demands and the failure to apply the religion's values in their daily lives. When Malcolm described himself as moving 'beyond atheism' in his

³⁵ Malcolm X., Alex Haley, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 347.

³⁶Peter Kihss, Malcolm X Shot to Death at Rally. *The New York Times*. February 22, 1965., 1. <https://www.nytimes.com/1965/02/22/archives/malcolm-x-shot-to-death-at-rally-here-three-other-negroes-wounded.html>

³⁷ Abdat, Fathie Bin Ali. "Malcolm X and Christianity.", 26.

³⁸ Recep Şentürk, *Malcolm X: The Struggle for Human Right*, 81.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

autobiography, he meant that he was experiencing a spiritual crisis, questioning Christian theology with exposure to other religions in prison.⁴⁰ To fill the spiritual void after leaving Christianity, Malcolm chose to seek and understand the truth on his own terms without any intermediary agents between himself and God. In essence, Malcolm's shift from a devoted Christian to an atheist showcased his search for authenticity and justice within the realms of faith and identity. His rejection of organized religion was a transformative phase, marking the beginning of a more personalized and critical exploration of spirituality.

In prison, Malcolm went through a radical transformation in which he embraced Islam through the teachings of NOI and the guidance of Elijah Muhammad. The Black pride intertwined with religiosity was what attracted him to the organisation because the NOI represented a continuation, albeit in a different form of his upbringing and his family involvement with the Garvey movement. The NOI teachings provided Malcolm with a sense of continuity, resonating with the early experiences of his life. Additionally, Elijah Muhammad, who had already established communication with Malcolm during his imprisonment, developed an intimate, father-son relationship with him, reminiscent of the bond Malcolm had with his own father.⁴¹

Followers of NOI were indoctrinated to attribute the root cause of their adverse or negative lifestyles to the 'White devil' or the White race. Consequently, the self-loathing and resentment that Malcolm X initially had towards God shifted towards the White race, perceived as inherently devilish in the NOI's mythos. Followers of the NOI were also taught to avoid all interactions with Whites and told that Blacks could only succeed to the extent that they worked together for a common goal, which included returning to Africa. They both taught that economic independence was the key and that Black people needed to work together to acquire that independence.⁴² Followers of NOI were indoctrinated with the belief that Elijah Muhammad was a spiritual leader and messenger of God. This is evidenced by the public statement made by Malcolm in an interview with Louis Lomax, "The Messenger has seen God. He was with Allah and was given divine patience with the devil. He is willing to wait for Allah to deal with this devil...the rest of us Black Muslims have not seen God, we don't have this gift of divine patience with the devil."⁴³

During his time in NOI, Malcolm X encountered several Muslims outside of NOI. He met with Muslim students who came to America to study, who advised him to go outside of America to meet and learn from Muslim scholars. They repeatedly told Malcolm that scholars there would be able to teach him true and authentic Islam.⁴⁴ Malcolm's interest to learn about Islam outside of NOI was also cultivated during his trip with Elijah Muhammad to the Middle East in 1959, in which he met with other Muslim representatives within the international

⁴⁰ Abdat, Fathe Bin Ali. *"Malcolm X and Christianity."*, 31.

⁴¹ Barresi, J. (2006). *The Identities of Malcolm X*, 212.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Nuri Tinaz, "Rationalization of Malcolm X's Religious Understandings, Political Perspectives and Organizational Objectives." In *Malcolm X*, (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 321-366., 335.

⁴⁴ Dwi Hesti Yuliani-Sato, "A comparative study of the Nation of Islam and Islam", PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 2006., 72.

Islamic community to build formal connections for the NOI.⁴⁵ Malcolm's faith in Elijah and his teachings began to waver when it became obvious to him that he fathered a number of children with his private secretaries, which was against the moral code of the NOI.

Malcolm reached the cornerstone of his spiritual journey after he left the organisation in 1964. He established his own religious organisation, Muslim Mosque Inc. (MMI), in which he aligned the principles of the organisation according to the proper teachings of Islam based on the Qur'an and Sunnah.⁴⁶ Malcolm also made a trip to the Middle East to make his Hajj (pilgrimage) in Mecca. During his pilgrimage, he experienced the inclusive nature of Islam, where individuals of all races prayed together, challenging his separatist views. This transformative experience led him to embrace a more universal and inclusive approach to civil rights, emphasizing the shared humanity of all people. The experience also prompted him to abandon the NOI's racial philosophy and embrace the inclusive philosophy of Sunni Islam based on the Qur'an and Sunnah. He communicated his stance on religion to M.S. Handler, a New York Times journalist, asserting his allegiance to true Islam, as practiced by Muslims in Mecca, in a letter: "The religion [Islam] recognizes all men as brothers. It accepts all human beings as equals before God, and as equal members in the Human Family of Mankind. I totally reject Elijah Muhammad's racist philosophy, which he has labelled 'Islam' only to fool and misuse gullible people, as he fooled and misused me."⁴⁷ Malcolm then also emphasized his core belief in religion: "Islam, I believed now, was the Islam which was taught in Mecca - that there was no God but Allah, and that Muhammad ibn Abdullah who lived in the Holy City of Mecca fourteen hundred years ago was the Last Messenger of Allah."⁴⁸

Political Thinking

Malcolm X's political advocacies began to take shape during his affiliation with the Nation of Islam (NOI). His involvement with the NOI, led by Elijah Muhammad, marked a crucial period in his life, spanning from the early 1950s to the early 1960s. The Nation of Islam, an African American religious and political movement, played a significant role in shaping Malcolm's views and influencing his approach to social and political issues. Within the NOI, Malcolm served as a prominent spokesperson and minister, advocating for the rights and empowerment of African Americans. The teachings of Elijah Muhammad, emphasizing Black pride, self-reliance, and separation from White-dominated society, resonated strongly with Malcolm. Malcolm's speeches and messages during this period reflected the organization's teachings. He conveyed a message of Black unity, economic self-sufficiency, and the establishment of a separate Black state. Malcolm once declared: "We reject segregation even more militantly... We want separation... The Honourable Elijah Muhammad teaches us that segregation is when your life and liberty are controlled, regulated, by someone else. To segregate means to control.

⁴⁵ Barresi, J. (2006). *The Identities of Malcolm X*, 216.

⁴⁶ Malcolm X., Alex Haley, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 323.

⁴⁷ Nuri Tinaz, *Rationalization of Malcolm X*, 354.

⁴⁸ Ibid

Segregation is that which is forced upon inferiors by superiors. But separation is that which is done voluntarily, by two equals - for the good of both!"⁴⁹

Rejecting the nonviolent approach of the civil rights movement led by figures like Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X promoted a more assertive stance in the face of racial injustice. His political advocacy within the Nation of Islam gained attention, thus he became a prominent figure known for his powerful oratory and uncompromising stance on civil rights. Malcolm's speeches often addressed systemic racism, inequality, and the need for African Americans to assert their rights and demand justice. It is crucial to recognize that at the outset of this period, the dominant perspective and dialogical voice in Malcolm's advocacies were those of the assertive minister within NOI. He was actively seeking new converts for the organization and involved in pedagogical activities within it. In this voice, Malcolm portrayed his own conversion to fellow Blacks as a testament to Elijah Muhammad's power to rescue Black people from the influence of the White devils. This voice frequently opposed the "White man's religion," Christianity, contending that it deliberately constrained Black people in their inferior position.⁵⁰

Malcolm X's political journey underwent a transformation after his separation with the Nation of Islam in 1964. His pilgrimage to Mecca and exposure to true Islam played a crucial role in reshaping his political and ideological perspectives, leading to a more inclusive and humanistic approach in his later years. Malcolm himself mentioned in his autobiography that the Hajj experience compelled him to reshape his thoughts and perceptions.⁵¹ Malcolm realized that the White people he encountered during Hajj displayed a different attitude compared to those in the United States. During his travels in the Muslim world, he encountered, conversed with, and dined with individuals who, in America, could have been categorized as 'White'. However, their mindset was liberated from the White perspective through the teachings of Islam. Malcolm X observed a sincere and genuine brotherhood practiced by people of all colours collectively, irrespective of their skin tone.⁵² He noted in his autobiography: "That morning was when I first began to reappraise the "White man." It was when I first began to perceive that "White man," as commonly used, means complexion only secondarily; primarily it described attitudes and actions. In America, "White man" meant specific attitudes and actions toward the Black man, and toward all other nonWhite men. But in the Muslim world, I had seen that men with White complexions were more genuinely brotherly than anyone else had ever been. That morning was the start of a radical alteration in my whole outlook about "White" men."⁵³

When he returned to the United States, he had a much less separatist and more humanitarian vision of how to effect improvements in the United States. The tolerance and sincerity among different races that Malcolm observed during his pilgrimage prompted him to re-evaluate and modify his previous understanding of racial issues. Malcolm started adopting

⁴⁹ Nuri Tinaz, 324.

⁵⁰ Barresi, J. (2006). *The Identities of Malcolm X*, 214.

⁵¹ Malcolm X., Alex Haley, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 347.

⁵² *Ibid*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 340.

a more humanitarian approach, focusing on reconciling White and Black communities in America. This is in contradiction with the political approach he had before which was to encourage separatism between Black and White. He aimed to create a new perception of the Black struggle and promote brotherhood between Black and White men. Shortly after his pilgrimage, Malcolm X made a visit to Africa and established the Organisation of Afro-American Unity (OAAU). This organization aimed to address and enhance the conditions of all African Americans, irrespective of their religious beliefs.⁵⁴

Malcolm faced a fundamental transformation in his understanding of religion, race, and skin colour. He no longer saw racism as a biologically predetermined condition but as an inherently destructive ideology that had deeply rooted itself in individuals and societies. Racism, according to Malcolm, was an earth-shattering evil, preventing God's creatures from living as one. He saw the Hajj pilgrimage as a unifying experience, where people of all races and colours came together as equals, forgetting their social ranks. This realization led Malcolm to preach against American racism and its evils. 'The Diary'⁵⁵, a record of Malcolm X's thoughts during 1964, provides several instances where Malcolm X demonstrates that racism is the primary source of injustice. He expressed how his understanding of White people had evolved from his previous NOI perspective: "When they [Whites] accepted Islam, it removed that [racism]. Well, White people whom I have met, who have accepted Islam, they don't regard themselves as White, but as human beings. And by looking upon themselves as human beings, their Whiteness to them isn't the yardstick of perfection or honor or anything else. Therefore, this creates within them an attitude that is different from the attitude of the White people you meet here in America. It was in Mecca that I realized that White is actually an attitude more than it's a color."

In essence, Malcolm observed a transformative shift in the mindset of White individuals who embraced Islam, where their identity was no longer defined by their Whiteness but by their shared humanity. This change in attitude challenged the conventional perceptions of race and colour prevalent in America.⁵⁶

Research Findings and Analysis

Based on the comprehensive discussions and analysis, several key findings and conclusions can be drawn. First of all, the study reveals compelling insights into Malcolm X's transformative journey through three main identities:

⁵⁴ Barresi, J. (2006). *The Identities of Malcolm X*, 217.

⁵⁵ The Diary of Malcolm X is a record or a private journal kept by the human rights leader during 1964, a year he largely spent traveling in Africa and the Middle East.

⁵⁶ Emin Poljarevic, "The Political Theology of Malcolm X: Between Human Dignity and Returning the Gaze." *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 96, no. 1 (2020), 21.

1. **Malcolm Little:** He was raised in a challenging upbringing in a Christian family, encountering threats and violence from white supremacists. In this phase of his life, Malcolm experienced profound disruptions that greatly impacted his sense of self and his relationship with faith. Malcolm engaged in criminal activities, leading to nearly six years of imprisonment and at the same time struggled to find the meaning of faith and religion.
2. **Malcolm X:** Malcolm's struggle took a pivotal turn during his imprisonment. In prison, he encountered the teachings of the Nation of Islam (NOI) and its leader, Elijah Muhammad. Malcolm's involvement with the NOI significantly influenced in building his self-identity. Malcolm's conversion to Islam, particularly within the NOI, marked a redefinition of his identity. He adopted the name Malcolm X, signifying the rejection of his "slave" name and the reclamation of his lost African heritage. This redefinition was not only a religious transformation but also an identity transformation built on Black empowerment.
3. **El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz:** Malcolm's pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964 played a pivotal role in resolving his internal struggles. Malcolm's vision expanded beyond racial struggles to encompass broader humanistic ideals. Islam, as practiced globally, provided him with a framework for justice, equality, and brotherhood, influencing his thoughts on societal transformation. This also marked a crucial phase in his identity formation, distancing himself from the NOI's racial separatism. Malcolm's decision to depart from the NOI reflected his understanding of ideological differences between the organisation and Sunni Islam.

Malcolm X's identity underwent a dynamic evolution influenced by Islam, transitioning from a racial separatist to a more inclusive and humanitarian perspective. This evolution is evident in his ideological shifts post-Hajj. Islam acted as a catalyst for Malcolm's personal and political development. Its principles of justice, equality, and unity resonated deeply with his quest for authenticity, social justice, and the upliftment of the African American community. The research highlights the tension between the universalism of Islam, promoting unity among diverse believers, and the separatist stance of the NOI. Malcolm's journey reflects a quest to reconcile these conflicting ideologies. The study also emphasises how Malcolm X's legacy as a prominent civil rights figure and advocate for justice is intricately tied to his embrace of Islam. The research findings emphasize the enduring impact of Islamic principles on shaping his legacy.

Conclusion

Islam has played a significant role in shaping Malcolm X's identity and thoughts. Malcolm X's introduction to the religion through the Nation of Islam (NOI) transformed him from a troubled individual with an identity crisis into a devout believer with a strong sense of personal identity.

He became the leading voice and national representative for the organisation. NOI's teachings, emphasising Black empowerment and separatism, initially resonated with Malcolm. However, his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964 became a turning point, widening his worldview to a universal and inclusive Islam that transcended racial boundaries. This experience dismantled his earlier beliefs, leading him to reject NOI's racial ideology and embrace a more humanitarian interpretation of Islam. Malcolm's journey with Islam not only influenced his personal beliefs but also guided his advocacy for civil rights, marking a transition from a militant separatist to a proponent of interracial harmony and universal brotherhood, emphasising equality and justice for all.

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