

THE THEME OF EXILE IN *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MALCOLM X*

Adelina Vartolomei
Ovidius University, Constanța

The Autobiography of Malcolm X was actually written by Alex Haley. Malcolm X did not have the time himself to sit down and write his story because of his constant traveling and his need to focus more on the speeches he had to give to his fellow black men. Consequently, he met with Alex Haley whenever he had the time and practically dictated his life story which Haley organized as he saw most fit.

The reason why Malcolm X dictated his autobiography was, first of all, because Elijah Muhammad had encouraged him to do so. He wanted to obey Elijah Muhammad whom he looked up to very much. Malcolm was, in fact, a little reticent at first when he received the offer of writing his autobiography and told Alex Haley that he would actually do whatever Mr. Muhammad told him to do. However, this might have been an incentive only in the beginning. As Malcolm X grew apart from Elijah Muhammad and no longer obeyed him, he continued his mission as a savior and revealed the truth, his own truth. Second of all, Malcolm X might have wanted to reach out to his fellow men and pull them out of the imposed prison called Harlem. Considering his life from beginning to end, he would have been a great model with whom those living in Harlem might have identified. His entire life, Malcolm X escaped a type of imprisonment only to run into another. However, the one that he believed should be deconstructed most of all was Harlem.

In "Discipline and Punish", Michel Foucault believed that words could be easily used in order to control people, especially those people that had been deemed as outcasts. Consequently, they are somehow exiled with the help of prisons or asylums. Perhaps, in the case of African Americans, Harlem could be seen as a place of exile. In this autobiography, Harlem is gradually perceived as a place where all African Americans were kept together and harmless with the help of alcohol, drugs and various other distractions. Foucault's idea that "a body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault 263) could be easily applied in the case of African Americans. This issue of Harlem as a prison has been taken up by cinematography as well. For instance, the director Spike Lee in *Do the Right Thing* expresses such complaints through the voices of some of his characters. A group of African-Americans realizes that most businesses

belong to white people, stereotypically Italians, or to Asians, while the majority of blacks are unemployed or have very menial jobs working for others. Ironically, the three men expressing such beliefs sit around all day on some chairs in the street philosophizing instead of finding some work to do.

However, Harlem was not the first place that imposed limits on Malcolm. First of all, Malcolm Little had a promising start as a child who dreamed of achieving many great things throughout his life. Unfortunately, his English professor clipped his wings by saying that his color would not take him that far and that he should settle for something less important and appropriate for his own race.

He told me, "Malcolm, you ought to be thinking about a career. Have you been giving it thought?" The truth is, I hadn't. I never have figured out why I told him, "Well, yes, sir, I've been thinking I'd like to be a lawyer." Lansing certainly had no Negro lawyers - or doctors either - in those days, to hold up an image I might have aspired to. All I really knew for certain was that a lawyer didn't wash dishes, as I was doing. 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 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." (Haley 42-43)

After that speech, his youth practically revolved around less important activities. It was the first moment he realized he could not fit in such a society and chose to leave it behind before being exiled by others. He became a self-exiled individual. Consequently, Malcolm gradually turned into a hustler. In the beginning, he became involved in gambling. Fascinated by this world of money and fashion, he made a purpose of his life to climb the social ladder in the hustling business. He bought drugs, sold them, took them and even made plans for robberies. Malcolm Little turned into a typical African American that tried to make ends meet in Harlem. In *Metaphors and Myths of Cross-Cultural Literacy*, Shirley Rose points out a change in identity each time Malcolm changed his environment. He started out as Malcolm Little but as soon as he got in Harlem, he received the nickname of Red. However, this was one of the many attempts to participate in the wrong community which led to nothing more than limiting all he could be.

Therefore, if he was able to fight his way out of such a situation, then everyone like him could achieve the same goal. On top of that, his ability to reach out and save other African Americans was not rooted only in his private life but in his use of language as well. Not only could he use the slang from experience but he also knew how to adapt his speech to his audience. At a certain gathering, he and one of his colleagues were met by a man from the crowd that was there to listen. Malcolm X was the only one that could understand him because he was familiar with that type of speech. And because he was able to understand him, Malcolm was also able to communicate with him and share a part of his experience that might influence the man in a positive way.

Furthermore, one might see how Malcolm is practically jumping from one type of imprisonment to another. He realized the existence of boundaries the moment his professor gave him guidance. In fact, the issue of race would be at the basis of his moving from one type of prison to another. The first one, as mentioned before, was his school and the second one was Harlem. While he was in Harlem, though, Malcolm was not aware of his limitations and he did not draw such harsh lines between whites and blacks. It was not until he was brought out of it that he realized it was so.

The second one, which was also mentioned by Foucault, was prison. However, it had quite an opposite effect instead of the one expected, i.e. that of integrating people into the mainstream and make them as conventional and ordinary as possible. For instance, this was the case in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, in which McMurphy was completely crushed by the combine, the authority. A rebel at first, McMurphy was gradually educated by nurse Ratched. Aware of the concept of freedom and the power of the system to put pressure on whoever cannot integrate, Randle fights against homogeneity and tries to deconstruct any discourse of power but fails miserably. On the other hand, Malcolm Little enters prison unaware of his ignorance and unwilling to escape it. There are conventions that surround him that he finds difficult to overcome as they probably give him a sense of security and fake superiority. For example, he is attached to his haircut which required a lot of effort to achieve. A certain scene shows how demeaning was actually this small addiction to fashion. Malcolm had to put a certain substance in his hair and wait as much as he could stand the burning before washing. One time the water was not running and desperate because of the burn, he shoved his head in the toilet bowl. A second entrapment, which he had his eyes opened to by the Muslims, was his addiction to drugs, alcohol and cigarettes. They were weapons used by the white people against black people. On the one hand, African Americans wasted their hard worked money on these vices. The moment they were paid by white men, they hurriedly went and gave their money back to them. On

the other hand, any possible rebellion or intellectual achievement was stifled by these calming pills, powders or needles.

Fortunately, prison helped him free himself. Malcolm Little abandoned his habits and turned a new page in his life. He admitted to having a new world open before his eyes as he improved himself intellectually and, like Randle, began to challenge the system. One example to prove this change in his behavior is his sudden interest in religion and his questioning of Jesus Christ's race. Moreover, he gradually managed to deconstruct the white people's discourse of power. He spent his entire time reading the dictionary and learning the words. Consequently, he discovered the connotations of colors that become deeply ingrained in people's minds. Black stood for something dirty, soiled, characterized by the absence of light, thoroughly sinister or evil, very sad, gloomy, or calamitous or characterized by hostility or angry discontent (Merriam-Webster Online). On the other hand, white was free from spot or blemish, free from moral impurity, not intended to cause harm, fortunate and favorable (Merriam-Webster Online). Affected very much by this obvious attack on his race, Malcolm exchanged the values attached to each color. This would explain how easily he assimilated the new religion which assumed an African American as the original man and questioned Christ's and god's skin color.

Last but not least, what followed in Malcolm X's life might also be seen as a different type of imprisonment. Filled with enthusiasm and blinded by Elijah Muhammad's power, he took in all of the Muslims' teachings without questioning them. For instance, he strongly promoted separation from the white race as opposed to segregation. In one of his speeches, "The Crisis of Racism", he stated that "He that led into captivity should go into captivity. We know what's coming to you and we don't want to share it with you" (<http://www.brothermalcolm.net/mxwords/whathesaidarchive.html>).

He predicted the white race would be punished for its past sins and for that reason Malcolm wanted to isolate the African Americans from the rest of the Americans without having any other connection to them. This assumed they were to develop their own economy, politics and culture. Segregation presupposed a rapport of power in which one group of people was superior and another inferior. For these reasons and not only was separation preferred. In his fight for equal rights, he would refuse any help coming from white people.

No sane black man really wants integration! No sane white man really wants integration! No sane black man really believes that the white man ever will give the black man anything more than token integration. No! The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches that for the black man in America the only solution is complete separation from the white man! (Haley 268-269)

However, this was still a form of exile. Malcolm X was born in a land that rejected him at the time and consequently, Malcolm decided to do the same without running away from it though. Unfortunately, this separation went even further as it spread inside the African American community. Instead of having a full collaboration, Malcolm divided his fellow black men into house Negroes and field Negroes, identifying himself with the latter category and refusing any help from the first where he had placed Martin Luther King, for instance. This classification went back to the division made on the plantation and based itself on the way slaves responded to their masters. Malcolm assumed that it was the field Negroes that wanted freedom the most because they endured more sufferings than the rest; i.e. they worked in the fields picking cotton in the scorching sun from dawn to dusk with barely any water and food to keep them strong. They were the ones capable of anything to get rid of slavery, even responding to violence with violence. This had also been a part of Malcolm's policy at the beginning of his career as a Civil Right fighter.

He looked down on house Negroes because he assumed they identified themselves more with their master rather than with their own kind, something that was even made visible in their manner of expressing themselves. For instance, when referring to their master's house, the house Negroes would say "our house" including themselves almost in the same category with the ones who owned them. Due to this, those working out in the field presupposed that those who worked around the house had it better because they had a roof over their head, better food (that which was left after their masters ate) and as a consequence they felt safe and were not so willing to fight for their independence. This popular belief was also promoted by Eastman Johnson and his painting "Old Kentucky Home (Negro Life at the South)" from 1859 which presented a rather lazy group of African Americans hanging around the house, doing practically nothing while being spied on by their mistress.

However, in *Maladies of Power: A Kara Walker Lexicon*, Raymond Yasmil takes a closer look at Kara Walker's cut-paper silhouettes and realizes there was another side to this story and that house Negroes had a painful experience as well. One would have to think who the ones chosen to work so close to the master were. Perhaps there were voluptuous young women who would eventually end up being raped by their masters and scorned by their mistress as well as products of this rape who would also have to endure the hatred coming towards them. Moreover, African American men were also raped. Though there was no force and violence included in this, black men were black mailed by their mistresses into having sex with them. Obviously, it was the white women's word that mattered more and nobody would believe that it was the frail housewife that injured

the strong black slave. Therefore, neither the field Negroes, nor the house Negroes experienced less grief; they just had to endure different type of humiliation and pain. Ironically, Malcolm X identified himself with the field Negroes without realizing how much more the house Negroes had to endure as they were rejected by their masters and their own kind at the same time.

In the last part of his life, he realized once more that he had been surrounded by other boundaries. Malcolm X figured out isolation from all the other races was not the answer and it took him a second prison to make him come to this conclusion.

Our moral laws were policed by our Fruit of Islam - able, dedicated, and trained Muslim men. Infractions resulted in suspension by Mr. Muhammad, or isolation for various periods, or even expulsion for the worst offenses "from the only group that really cares about you". (Haley 242-243)

As punishment for his uttering the wrong words at the wrong time even when he was told to stay in the back for a while, he was prevented from preaching for an indeterminate period of time. Malcolm X was exiled by the group in which he had recently integrated because he had made a rather awful statement about John F. Kennedy's assassination, i.e. that the president had it coming. This remark upset the public because of Kennedy's popularity. During this time of punishment, he went to Mecca and reflected on the lessons he had received from Elijah Muhammad. In Mecca he was met by multiculturalism in its most harmonious state and after such a sight, other chains were broken and other boundaries pushed away. He drank and ate next to black people as well as blue-eyed white people and he was impressed by this collaboration between races. He looked back on his past and the way he had handled the issue of race. Malcolm X began to regret his aggressive rejection of the white people's help and his aggressive behavior in general. He realized that a better world could be created only if all white people and all black people worked together.

It might be seen as most unfortunate that Malcolm X was murdered at a time when he felt freer than he had ever felt in his life. He was stopped from helping other people to be as free as he was. He was a naïve pawn until the end of his life unaware of the political intrigues and did not have enough time to promote the beauty of multiculturalism.

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