

Malcolm x effect: african american consciousness



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“ Change has come to America,” were the famous words spoken by Barak Obama, the first African American President. No one in the 1960’s would have ever thought that an African American president would be in office nor that an African American would be the highest earning woman in America. Many people tend to credit Martin Luther King (MLK) for such change, however their credit should go to Malcolm X. Malcolm X was an African American leader, orator and is now a cultural icon. During the time when Malcolm was alive, he had a lot of opposition. Mainly all sectors of white society opposed him, even some African Americans, as they felt that he was too radical, and differed to the peaceful measures of MLK. However, more recent historiography of Malcolm X is shifted towards a more biased and positive conception. This could be because it is African Americans who write the majority of the historiography of Malcolm X. Thus, suggesting that Malcolm X is a more popular topic and key figure to their heritage or it could be that White Historians do not want to admit past failures regarding race. This positive conception of Malcolm X is mirrored through the African American populists[3]. Magnus O. Bassegy’s, ‘ Malcolm X and African American Self-Consciousness’ argues that Malcolm exposed the terrible psychological consequences of black self-hate and transformed African American self-consciousness by liberating African Americans and by challenging the oppressors’ longstanding claim of racial superiority[4]. The Majority of Revisionist Scholars including James Cone[5]support Bassegy’s argument. Although Bruce Perry’s[6]The life of a Man who changed Black America[7]gives a more critical account of Malcolm, by suggesting him to be a psycho historical basket case. This differs to the traditional anti-Malcolm bias, which normally depicts him as a “ violent” man. This essay will examine <https://assignbuster.com/malcolm-x-effect-african-american-consciousness/>

how Malcolm X articulated the African American consciousness and the ways in which he affected them then and now. Whether a “ Violent man” or “ psycho basket case”, Malcolm certainly impacted the African American consciousness by imprinting it with not only their history, but also their dignity and a sense of new pride.

To understand how Malcolm X changed the consciousness of Americans, one needs to understand Malcolm Little. His childhood, including his father’s lessons concerning black pride and self-reliance and his own experiences concerning race, played a significant role in Malcolm’s adult life[8].

Throughout Malcolm’s life, violence was a major theme. His mother was mixed raced, as a white man raped his grandmother and by the time he was thirteen, his house had been burnt down by the Klu Klux Klan, his father murdered[9], and his mother was in a mental institution. Malcolm was separated from his brothers and sisters and sent to a series of foster homes. He went to numerous schools where he was the only African American in the class. Malcolm was brought up to be prepared to be something that was more suited for an African American[10]. He left school early and became involved with hustling and criminal activities. At this time in his life, Malcolm Little, too like other African Americans tried to ‘ whiten’ himself. Malcolm ‘ painfully’ chemically straitened his hair and dated white women. His unlawful ways in New York and Boston ultimately landed him in prison in 1946 for robbery. Whilst in prison, Malcolm became a member of the Nation of Islam. From inside the prison Malcolm wrote letters to Elijah Muhammad, who was the leader of the Nation of Islam (NOI)[11]. Through this, Malcolm created his ideology of the ‘ white man is the devil’. Once he left prison, in 1952, he

became one of the Nation's leaders and chief spokesmen. Looking back on his life, it's clear to see there were many differing Malcolms: Victim, player, prisoner, hater, and anti-racist. As a result, Malcolm X is one of the most misunderstood leaders in history[12]. Like many other leaders, there is a turning point that opens the political and social space for a leader to come up through. Malcolm's turning point was the Hinton Johnson incident[13]in1957. Malcolm proved through this event his power to both white and black Americans. As one white policeman asserted, ' that is too much power for one man to have'. However as Benjamin Goodman asserted, ' But it was that same power and presence which so impressed and frightened the police that also attracted me and thousands of other so called Negroes to Malcolm"[14]. Malcolm created white fear and to black Americans, a leader to believe in. This one incident would change the lives of African Americans forever.

Louis Lomax's documentary titled The Hate that Hate Produced, broadcasted in 1959 that forced Malcolm to fame outside his religious circle.

Representatives of the print media, radio, and television frequently asked him for comments on racial issues. This newfound status of a celebrity helped Malcolm to use his oration skills and put him into the public sphere for all African Americans to see. Thus Malcolm became the public face of the Nation of Islam for nearly twelve years and travelled across America to articulate African Americans. As Clasby asserts, ' that's is where his career sparked from". Malcolm attacked Christianity because he argued that religion had brainwashed Black People to accept their subordination to the dominant society. Malcolm claimed that Islam is the natural religion for

African Americans[15]. However, it seems that in the beginning of Malcolm's religious movement, he was trying to find himself and who he was while preaching his ideology of African Americans. Consequently, it was then a political rather than religious journey, as Malcolm preached about black equality and Black Nationalism. Although he did create a religious organization[16]. Malcolm left the NOI in March 1964, because he found out Elijah Muhammad had been deceiving him and Nation of Islam[17]. He then made a pilgrimage to Mecca. He spent much of the last year of his life in Africa, and the Middle East observing and practising being a Muslim. He met with political leaders and addressed many audiences.

Malcolm's main political platform was black equality and black supremacy. Many Historians[18] suggest that, for many, Malcolm serves as the fountainhead of modern Black Nationalism[19], as he belonged to the Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism movements. By avoiding white connections, Malcolm was able to articulate the support base mainly in the ghettos, preaching that African American's should develop their own society. This included supporting community-based enterprises. Malcolm wanted to reject cooperating with European Americans until African Americans could achieve cooperation amongst themselves. Thus Malcolm has been called a black revolutionary. Although, upon his return from Mecca in 1964, Malcolm X abandoned his stance to racial separatism, as he demonstrated by agreeing to cooperate with integrationist civil rights groups. However, he was still in favour of Black Nationalism and advocated that black people in the U. S. be self-reliant[20]. Malcolm started to realize that he needed to accept and work with other races to get results. As Malcolm stated, " In my recent

travels into African countries and others, I was impressed by the importance of having a working unity among all peoples, black as well as white[21].” In 1964, Malcolm organized the Organization of Afro-American Unity, which was oriented toward freedom and liberation for black people and other repressed groups. However this new political philosophy was not welcomed very warmly by his supporters, and ultimately lead to his assassination on February 21 1965. To this day, his more radical viewpoints impacted African American Consciousness. Davis and Davenport agree, arguing that, ‘ exposure to Malcolm may alter feelings of political efficacy, political trust, interest in politics, and racial consciousness[22]’.

Malcolm felt that African American’s should not support the government because supporting the government meant you supported the white supremacy and those that repressed African Americans. Instead, Malcolm proposed Black economic leadership. For instance, black intelligence, black authority, and superiority. In other words, he ultimately understood capitalism to be as great an impediment to African American liberation as racism. As Rabaka argues, Malcolm X knew that it was not necessary for him to define himself as a communist, socialist, or Marxist[23]. Therefore, Harper carries much weight when he asserts, ‘ It should also be mentioned that the philosophy of Malcolm X was changing until his death[24]’.

This is supported by Rabaka’s argument asserting that, Malcolm X’s social and political thought, although consistently “ undergoing a radical process of change and development,” as James Cone contended, provides us with a paradigm of the possibilities of an engaged African-centered radical politics and social theory a “ critical theory.

Malcolm argued that he spoke the truth, and criticized Martin Luther King for his optimism of Civil Rights. He wanted change in attitudes whereas MLK wanted legislative change. Malcolm did not believe in the white man having any sympathy nor support, therefore he was the alternative side to MLK in the civil rights campaign. Malcolm did not support Martin Luther King's peaceful marches as he felt that it was a failure of Negro leadership and that it would never change white consciousness. Malcolm constantly ridiculed leader MLK[25], as he declared that nonviolence was the " philosophy of the fool." In response to Martin Luther King's famous " I Have a Dream" speech, Malcolm retorted, " While King was having a dream, the rest of us Negroes are having a nightmare.[26]"

Malcolm X believed in equality and that African Americans should have their right to defend themselves by any means necessary, if the constitution wouldn't protect them. " It doesn't mean that I advocate violence, but at the same time, I am not against using violence in self-defence. I don't call it violence when it's self-defence, I call it intelligence.[27]" As Clasby noted, ' Resistance needs violence, violence breeds further resistance, and when the tensions within have reached a certain level, some men like Malcolm X, come to prefer victory to survival'[28]. Thus Malcolm's policy on violence gave him aggressive status in the movement, and would later influence the Black Panther Party. Malcolm was in favour of the civil rights movement as he felt it was not just a domestic issue. As Bassegy contends, ' The philosophy was shaped by Noble Drew Ali's Moorish-American Science Temple Movement, the Nation of Islam, and Malcolm's critical reflection of the events in the World[29]. It is important to note what Perry argues that, Malcolm X

fathered no legislation. He engineered no stunning Supreme Court victories or political campaigns. He scored no major electoral triumphs. Yet, because of the way in which he articulated his followers' grievances and anger, the impact he had upon the body of politics was enormous. He mobilized black America's dormant rage and put it to work politically[30].

Malcolm represented the deep-rooted racial feelings, and said what those were thinking but were too frightened to say. He was initially their voice. He felt their thoughts, their feelings. It is because of him that most African Americans see themselves with such pride today. No longer did they feel alone; they knew they had each other and that they were a collective[31]. As Rabaka asserts, ' he stressed to them that they could " make heaven right here on this earth". Herein, perhaps, lies Malcolm X's greatest contribution to African critical thought: his radical commitment to continually recommit himself to end domination and discrimination and bring into being human liberation by any means necessary![32]. Malcolm created fear, and reversed the fear on to the White Supremacists. As Harper asserts, more than any other person Malcolm X was responsible for the new militancy that entered the movement in 1965[33]. Malcolm ultimately felt that it was the white man who had emasculated the black's self-esteem, and took away their individuality. Although Malcolm was able to use this as a liberation tool. Rabaka agrees, arguing that to develop an effective " Afro-American liberation movement," Malcolm X argued that African Americans needed to rethink their entire experience in the United States[34]. Therefore, they must look back to their heritage in Africa. As Bassey put it, his strategy was to urge black people to make a romantic identification with Africa.

The African American consciousness that Malcolm articulated focused on the individual's relationship to the community and their responsibility to that community, to respect and to defend its members.[35] Malcolm X embodied the African Americans through his words, through his preaching and speeches[36]. Education was a vital component to the articulation of African Americans. As Malcolm stated, " Without education, you're not going anywhere in this world[37]". Malcolm wanted to educate African Americans about their history. For Malcolm, an understanding of the historical achievements of black people, as well as the origins and evolution of their oppression in recent centuries, was an essential weapon in the hands of those struggling for their liberation[38]. Goodman furthers this argument and suggests that what Malcolm told African Americans was a simple, profound truth; one that blacks needed (and still need) to hear. And no one said it as effectively as Malcolm X[39]. Malcolm made African Americans know about their heritage. Cone agrees, and argues that African-Americans who are proud to be black should thank Malcolm for creating the cultural space that lets us claim our African heritage[40].

In an Interview discussing his surname, Malcolm explained that during slavery, the Surname denotes that a slave was this person's property. Therefore arguing that he had no idea what his family name was. " The only way we'll get freedom for ourselves is to identify ourselves with every oppressed people in the world. We are blood brothers to the people of Brazil, Venezuela, Haiti... Cuba - yes Cuba too.[41]" Thus Malcolm changed his last name to ' X'. Equally, it was the common practice in the NOI Therefore, Malcolm addressed the issue of identity to the extent that black/Negroe

Americans should be called/and were African Americans. As Bassey asserted, “Malcolm X took up the challenge of African American being, self-consciousness, and self-identity by arguing that blacks in America were African Americans”[42]. This contrasted to Du Bois’ double-consciousness theory that described it as an essential part of being a Negro in America. Bassey continues to explain that this double-consciousness accepted negative definitions that even impacted how blacks in America viewed their physical selves. This viewpoint can be noticed in our young people today[43]as they are proud to be African Americans. Malcolm’s success in articulating the African American consciousness can be seen today, as many African Americans are proud of whom they are and strive for success. As Clasby stated, ‘Today these people are emerging into history-politically, economically, and, of most importance, spiritually. They represent a new expression of human consciousness[44]’.

Through Malcolm’s strong belief in the Nation of Islam came this development, which led to the evolution of Malcolm’s perception of gender roles in our society. The leader has been considered to have more in common with a white man than that of an African American woman. Dyson agrees, suggesting ‘These slights of black women reflected the demonology of the Nation of Islam, which not only viewed racism as an ill from outside its group, but argued that women were a lethal source of deception and seduction from within[45]’. Controversially, Perry suggests that Malcolm was not as heterosexual as his Nation of Islam colleagues have always insisted[46]. This could therefore suggest why Malcolm saw women in such a negative light. Perry suggests that Malcolm’s insecurities and ambivalence

towards women fit the archetype of a repressed gay man and point to latent homosexuality[47]'. However, Bassey is more convincing, as she asserts that it was of the Nation of Islam that created these attitudes towards women, not Malcolm. Thus, " After Malcolm had broken away from the Nation of Islam, performed the hajj and visited Africa, Malcolm showed even more respect for women[48]". Therefore the support of African American Women during the time when Malcolm was alive was not for his view on women itself, but was for his political beliefs. Thus, it was Malcolm's ideology that affected their consciousness.

It is hardly surprising that African Americans believed in Malcolm X's ethos on Black Nationalism and equality. His audience would have grown up being discriminated for their colour of the skin. African Americans on a daily basis were exposed to discrimination and violence. During the 1960's, there was a growing dissatisfaction amongst African Americans for equality. When African Americans followed Martin Luther King's peaceful methods, more violence followed. When Africans Americans tried to protest peacefully, for instance at the Birmingham riots in 1963, they were welcomed by militant policemen. Therefore as their peaceful methods did not work, they turned to Malcolm who provided an answer for a utopian future.

It is ironic that originally the media highly opposed Malcolm X when he was alive. It was very easy to dismiss a " violent black man", which the media portrayed. Now that he has been dead for 45 years, with the advantage of hindsight, the media now is one of his biggest supporters. For instance, Malcolm X, the 1992 biographical film directed by Spike Lee[49], portrays Malcolm in an extremely positive light. Therefore, this is evidence to support <https://assignbuster.com/malcolm-x-effect-african-american-consciousness/>

the argument that Malcolm X has not only changed African American Consciousness but also White American Consciousness. With Denzel Washington being nominated for an Academy Award (which is considered as an extremely white conservative Ceremony) for Best Actor for his portrayal of Malcolm X, suggests that times have changed. The knowledge of that the film was critically acclaimed, suggests that people are now more open minded to change and accept the past and can admit doing wrong. Equally, it shows that there is a popular demand for nostalgia for Malcolm, as their present consciousness is reflected through or sourced from him. Davis and Davenport examined the extent to which the film Malcolm X and its reinforcement in the media influenced political attitudes among African Americans. They found that individuals who saw the film and received reinforcement from a televised documentary became more racially conscious, more concerned about race relations, and more knowledgeable about Malcolm X the man[50]. However one can argue that Malcolm has been idealized, and turned into a mythic character. Clasby concurs and noted that, Malcolm was about to go from history to myth[51]. The filmic conveyance of Malcolm as a mythical icon is very important as it represents the legacy that African Americans want him to be portrayed as. Persuasively, as Clasby, Painter and Davis and Davenport argued, ' While each of these retellings invents a new narrative, neither the book nor the film is congruent with the life that Malcolm Little/Malcolm X lived, day by day, between 1925 and 1965[52]'. Therefore the media is subjective. Thus, attitudinal changes are fundamental re-visions in political and social attitudes created by images in the media[53].

Malcolm X not only impacted the African American consciousness but also African consciousness. One key example can be seen in the final scene of Malcolm X, as it takes place in a classroom in Soweto Township in South Africa, with anti-apartheid activist and future South African President Nelson Mandela citing one of Malcolm X's quotes. As Davis and Davenport asserts, ' Nelson Mandela, another symbol of race and manhood. The vision-still pan-African-raises hopes for another round of consciousness- rising among black nationalists[54]'. Equally, with the numerous children of African descent, both in the United States and Africa, declaring, " I am Malcolm X", suggests that Malcolm's pride of Africa was being echoed. Malcolm gave African's their confidence to fight, in literal terms, for their rights. Therefore he transformed their ideology for the better. However, it could be argued that his extremist views have had a negative impact in such countries as Zimbabwe, where his influence of violence and extreme ideology proves that peace is not possible, and so therefore creating more of a racial divide. Thus, if his voice resonates outside of America he surely must have been an influential man.

As a non-black person, I cannot wholly relate to Malcolm X. My ancestors were not slaves, and by that were not deprived their rights in a foreign country. Despite of this, having been born in South Africa during the apartheid era, Malcolm X's ideology has impacted my conscious. One could argue that he was very manipulative and charismatic, however all the issues he raised were true. All over Africa, civilians were taken from their country, in order to be slaves. They lived in the most unjust manner. This anger throughout the generations of families and centuries of hardship was

undoubtedly going to build up...and the explosion/catalyst was Malcolm X. For instance," We're not Americans, we're Africans who happen to be in America. We were kidnapped and brought here against our will from Africa. We didn't land on Plymouth Rock - that rock landed on us.[55]" As Cone asserts, ' All Americans owe Malcolm a great debt. He was not a racist, as many misguided observers have claimed. He was an uncompromising truth-teller whose love for his people empowered him to respect all human beings. " I am for truth," he said, " no matter who tells it. I am for justice no matter who is for or against it. I am a human being first and foremost, and as such I am for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole.[56]"

Today Malcolm exists within the consciousness of most African Americans, even though some might not even know. Malcolm X was the American prototype of this developing consciousness[57]. Although it is mainly the young who see Malcolm as such an icon, as Davis and Davenport noted, it is necessary to examine more carefully what Malcolm X represents to different age groups among African Americans. To younger African Americans, Malcolm X is attractive in part because he was attractive to a younger generation when he was alive. To young African American adults, the rediscovery of Malcolm X represents the articulation of their anger, impatience, and discontent with mainstream culture. Identifying with the violence and hatred associated with Malcolm X becomes an expression of their own defiance and as well as their own toughness. Conversely, to older individuals, Malcolm X is not a rediscovery. For African Americans who experienced the civil rights movement, he represents the violent and revolutionary antithesis to Martin Luther King and his creed of nonviolence

and passivity[58]. Although, when compared to MLK, MLK did not give African Americans their identity, heritage and pride...it was Malcolm. Therefore as Horne convincingly notes, ' He is an integral part of the scaffolding that supports a contemporary African-American identity. His fascination with music and dance and nightclubs undergirded his bond with blacks. A significant development that is accelerating in Afro-America in the post-war era is cool or hip philosophy. It involves a manner, language, a mode of dress, and more[59]. Therefore, today, Malcolm exists within the consciousnesses of African Americans.

The New York Post wrote after Malcolm's assassination, " even his sharpest critics recognized his brilliance-often wild, unpredictable and eccentric, but nevertheless possessing promise that must now remain unrealized." [60] This statement could not have been more wrong. With the advantage of hindsight, this essay has demonstrated that it is clear that Malcolm X transformed the consciousness of African Americans and that no area of the African-American community escaped Malcolm's influence. Malcolm awaked Black America, and gave them their confidence to do what then was thought of as impossible. Although Malcolm's ideology was never persistent, this in turn helped him to appeal to a much larger audience. As Cone asserts, ' Although dead for nearly 27 years, Malcolm's influence in the African-American community is much greater today than during his lifetime[61]'. Malcolm's representation through the media, support his legacy and bring it to the attentions of the young African Americans today and for the future generations of African Americans. Not only did Malcolm X impact African Americans but he also impacted Africans all over the world. Wherever Black

people gather to talk about their struggle for justice, the ghost of Malcolm's presence is there, reminding them of the strengths and weaknesses of their past and present efforts. The more Black people reflect on the meaning of Malc