

The Iconoclastic Conversion of Malcolm X: Trauma of Black Nationals Behind Prison Writings To Discover Black American Identity

Mr. V. Sabarinathan⁵ & Dr. N. Lakshmi Priya⁶

ABSTRACT

The life of Malcolm X and his transformation is one of the notable occurrences of Black American identity in the search for racial equivalence. The period that Malcolm X spent in jail made him from an unruly boy to a Civil Rights leader. This intellectual enlightenment profoundly shaped his view of race, identity, and institutionalized tyranny. For example, prison literature developed as a hub on which he rebuilt his identity, sustained himself through independent education and evolved towards a rational understanding of the intricate aspects of Black identity in the United States. Significant to the investigation of prison literature and its influence on the growth of Malcolm X, the role of literary works and personal narratives for racial equality and comprehension should be taken into account with the broader insinuations of the actions that took place.

Malcolm X is known as one of the supreme symbols in the African American community and also as a Muslim minister. His beliefs significantly reformed during his entire lifetime. He firmly advocated for Black Nationalism and separatism, where self-determination and the autonomy of Black people were essential concepts. Malcolm X converted from Christianity to Islam, which aimed for a political reformation, more than a religious faith. That intensely influenced his thoughts about race and society during those years of his life. He said at this stage that a necessary step to overcoming the deadly threat of racism meant organizing a Black entity in an independent space, insisting that integration alone would not be enough. Malcolm X's exploration of Black identity within the prison system is marked by a profound understanding of the connection between race and identity, significantly influencing his literary bestowment. He learned the terrible reality behind systemic oppression inside the penitentiary more deeply than had been possible outside, and this allowed him to build a greater awareness of the crises encountered in America, thus inspiring action toward change among Black Americans.

Journal: Boston Research Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities

Keywords: Black Nationals, Liberation, Community, identity

Accepted: 25 March 2025

Published: 15 April 2025

ISSN: Online ISSN: 2834-4863 | Print ISSN: 2834-4855

Language: English

Research ID: f42050b4-dc39-4eff-b011-61638ba121f8

Type: Peer-Reviewed Research Article (Open Access)



The authors declare that no competing interests exist. The authors contributed equally to this work. This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License as an open access article. CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

Read Online: <https://bit.ly/4jBnNTf>

Authors: **δ** – Part-Time Research Scholar, Madurai Kamaraj University

θ – Research Supervisor Assistant Professor of English GTN Arts College (Autonomous) Dindigul (Tamil Nadu), India.

I. INTRODUCTION

Malcolm X's progressing beliefs demonstrated an increasing recognition of the complexities associated with race relations and a conviction in the potential for establishing a more just and equitable society. Malcolm X remains a strong icon for social and racial justice. His eloquence and literary work inspired many people who endured to stand for several aspects of rights.

The lack of prison literature would challenge the small influence on the intellectual and personal development of Malcolm X. In prison, however, he became an ardent reader of books that impacted his outlook affectionately. These include noticeable writings by Marcus Garvey, which offered historical reference to the Black power and self-autonomy. Those scriptures led him to see the matters connecting to justice and noble integrity. Therefore, through self-learning, Malcolm X metamorphosed his identity from hopelessness to purpose, constructing a basis for his future activism. He used those in his later speeches, with the theme of self-reliance, pride, and the inescapability of opposing oppression imbibed into them.

In the echoes of his identity, he deeply spoke with his inmates in the prison and found an understanding of the standing of community and solidarity for marginalized people. He also developed his knowledge that the mutual experiences of racism and disenfranchisement were not isolated incidents but rather belonged to a broader concern of the whole system. This understanding was the foundation on which his belief stood philosophy with a foundation rooted in group identity and opposition to a culture that wanted to wash away one's sense of self as a Black man.

Also, the personal threats to Malcolm X's life and the broader implications are far away. These effects extend beyond his person to perpetuate the struggle for racial justice and equality within the United States. His narrative aids as a fascinating framework in dissecting the complexities of Black American identity. Personal

experiences offer opportunities for insight into collective challenges. A distinguished example is Malcolm X, whose life is an archetypal paradigm of how personal story informs understanding of the broader context within the systemic racism operates and the fight for civil rights. His philosophies would be applied to current debates about identity and race, as they provide the groundwork for making sense of modern-day challenges facing Black Americans.

In the end, the new experience of Malcolm X, particularly from his time in prison was an insightful finding of Black American identity through literature and personal testimony. This intellectual revitalization, having the power of reading in his hands, had the power to redefine his identity and purpose; the exploration of what race and systematic oppression within the Prison led to a new realization, which understood the value of communal struggle and comrade solidarity. In the present context, the visions of Malcolm X still influence contemporary. The continued battle with racial issues, inequality, and injustice, as exhibited by the lessons learned from Malcolm X's life, highlights the importance of education, community, and resilience in dealing with adversity.

II. MALCOLM X: THE POWERFUL REVIVALIST FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN RIGHTS

Malcolm took the surname "X" to signify a break he had with his white slave master heritage. The most protuberant characteristic of the Nation of Islam is Malcolm X. This organizational movement highlighted religious and political aspects of the idea of promoting Black Nationalism and self-determination. Malcolm X inclined towards Black Nationalism in the early 1950s and quickly emerged as a captivating leader. He is an example of the Black Power movement, which called on blacks to assume liberation and fight for justice. Malcolm X's rhetorical skills and texts were an inspiration to many African American activists fighting for justice and equality in the matter of racial issues. The oratory ideas of Malcolm X often contradicted the positions adopted by other

leaders in the civil rights movement, like Martin Luther King Jr. Malcolm X believed that violence is needed to promote racial justice. Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965 at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem, New York City. How he died sparked a massive outcry across the country, strengthening the energy of the Black Power movement. Malcolm X's legacy is an example of animate social justice organizations throughout the world. His autobiography is one of the most influential works in American literature, making for a compelling narration of his life and experiences. While Malcolm X finally became a leader of the Nation of Islam and a supposed icon of the Black Power movement, his identity is more complex than these roles suggest. He also lived being a good Muslim, a dutiful family man, and a passionate voice of social justice. His story is a historical, monumental, account of human resilience, self-determination, and relentless pursuit of racial equality.

Malcolm X stands as one of the most influential yet polarizing figures in the American civil rights movement. As a revivalist, he did not merely advocate for civil rights—he redefined the very nature of resistance among African Americans, emphasizing dignity, self-reliance, and militant self-defense over passive endurance. His legacy is not confined to the radicalism he was often criticized for during his life; rather, it is embedded in the empowerment of Black identity and the reinvigoration of political consciousness in the mid-20th century.

Unlike his contemporaries, particularly Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X's vision for change was rooted in a deep skepticism of white liberalism and the promises of integration. He argued that systemic racism was not a social ill that could be corrected through moral persuasion but a deeply entrenched structure of oppression that required radical transformation. This analysis resonated with many African Americans who had grown disillusioned with slow progress and continued injustices even after landmark legal victories like *Brown v. Board of Education*. Malcolm X's rhetoric, often branded as militant, provided a necessary counterbalance to the more conciliatory approaches of other civil rights leaders, thereby broadening the scope of Black political expression.

A pivotal aspect of Malcolm X's influence lies in his articulation of Black pride. Through his work with the Nation of Islam and later as an

independent voice after his pilgrimage to Mecca, he consistently challenged the internalized racism that plagued African American communities. His emphasis on reclaiming African heritage, rejecting Eurocentric standards of beauty and identity, and building economic independence were revolutionary ideas that laid the foundation for the later Black Power movement. In this way, Malcolm X served not just as a political figure, but as a cultural revivalist, urging African Americans to redefine themselves on their own terms.

Moreover, his evolution over time highlights the complexity of his philosophy. After his break with the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X adopted a more global perspective, identifying with anti-colonial struggles across Africa and Asia. His shift toward pan-Africanism and human rights advocacy revealed a maturing ideology that sought justice not only for African Americans but for oppressed peoples worldwide. This transformation challenges the simplistic characterization of Malcolm X as merely a separatist or extremist, showcasing instead a leader capable of growth and deep reflection.

In conclusion, Malcolm X's contribution to the African American struggle for justice was far more than rhetorical defiance; it was a powerful revival of Black identity, self-respect, and collective purpose. His legacy continues to influence modern social movements that prioritize racial justice, autonomy, and systemic change. In the face of persistent racial inequalities, Malcolm X's voice remains a compelling call to action—fierce, unapologetic, and fundamentally transformative.

III. THE IMPACT CREATED BY MALCOLM X ON THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Malcolm X became an unavoidable figure in the Civil Rights Movement; his approach to problems of society was entirely different from other leaders. He was committed to Black Nationalism and self-defence, and his approach was often aggressive and stubborn. He paved a separate path and unique structure called radicalization; his rhetorical style of Malcolm X led the movement to a much more radical path as it questioned the mainstream standard of peaceful protests. His advocacy for self-defence and, in certain cases, violence found an echo among several African Americans who felt that integration was not adequate to address systemic racism and

discrimination. The ideology of Black Nationalism had always said that African Americans needed to advocate for self-determination and liberation. Malcolm X's message transcended the geographical borders of the United States

Malcolm X's influence stemmed from his insistence on viewing civil rights as part of a broader human rights struggle. Unlike leaders who primarily targeted U.S. domestic policies and racial segregation, Malcolm X internationalized the issue, drawing parallels between the African American experience and colonial struggles in Africa and Asia. This global lens allowed him to reframe the plight of Black Americans as not just a matter of civil liberties but of human dignity and justice. His speeches at forums such as the Organization of African Unity and the United Nations were early indicators of this shift, and they inspired a more radical, global perspective within segments of the civil rights movement.

One of Malcolm X's most significant contributions was his emphasis on psychological and cultural liberation. He challenged African Americans to reject the dominant narrative that portrayed them as inferior, urging them instead to embrace their African heritage and to develop pride in their identity. This cultural awakening, fueled by Malcolm's rhetoric, became a catalyst for the Black Power movement in the late 1960s, and continues to influence discussions of race and identity today.

Though often cast as a militant counterpoint to King's philosophy of nonviolence, Malcolm X's stance was more nuanced. He did not promote aggression but advocated for self-defense in the face of violence. His famous declaration, "by any means necessary," underscored his belief that African Americans had a right to protect themselves from racial aggression. This message resonated particularly with younger Black activists who were frustrated with the slow pace of change and the continued brutality faced by their communities, even amidst peaceful protests.

Malcolm X's assassination in 1965 cut short what many believe was an ongoing evolution in his thought. In the final year of his life, after his departure from the Nation of Islam and pilgrimage to Mecca, his views began to reflect a more inclusive understanding of the struggle for justice, signaling the potential for unity across racial and

religious lines. This transformation showed that Malcolm X was not only a man of conviction but one of intellectual growth and political maturity.

His journeys and public addresses drove worldwide anti-colonial and anti-racist campaigns, highlighting the universal aspect of racism. The "black power movement," which emerged during the late 1960s, must, by its right, be seen as part and parcel of the Black Power legacy. It is, after all, that movement that called for Black pride, self-determination, and empowerment in both political and economic fields. Malcolm's philosophical beliefs and articulateness formed the core of this movement that continues to influence American society today. Malcolm X's views are balanced on a militant stance against King's philosophy of non-violence. Therefore, King's ideology would not be too centralized on one narrow perspective and view: on the integration movement and non-violent protest. The willingness to challenge the status quo head-on with direct action as a crusade against racism was deemed necessary and a condition for victory in the struggle. It is a common consensus that no other figure has affected the Civil Rights Movement as much as Malcolm X. His extremist rhetoric, Black Nationalist ideology, and international influence all contributed to the course and vision through which the movement was shaped. Even though his claims of succession and leadership were sometimes compatible with those of his peers, his role in the struggle for racial equity and justice was undoubtedly integral.

IV. REFERENCES

Primary Source:

X, Malcolm, and Alex Haley. The Autobiography of Malcolm X. Ballantine Books, 1989. "Malcolm X and the Civil Rights Movement" by Clayborne Carson in The Journal of African American History.

Web Source:

- "Malcolm X and the Black Power Movement" by Stokely Carmichael in The New YorkTimes
1. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/malcolmx-and-civil-rights-movement/>. 20.10.2024
 2. <https://anthropologyreview.org/anthropology-glossary-of-terms/black-power-a-political-movement-to-empower-black-americans-in-the-us-in-the-1960s/>. 22.10.2024

3. <https://youtu.be/tFh4OloaJMo?si=9r-rKHPMQr1SK7eT>
4. https://youtu.be/wYbnPnr1egU?si=jmLBmKhS1_SiuFAB
5. <https://youtu.be/FZMrti8QcPA?si=zumC1-h8buiOysr3>

This page intentionally left blank