

Malcolm X's *The Autobiography* and US Race Relations

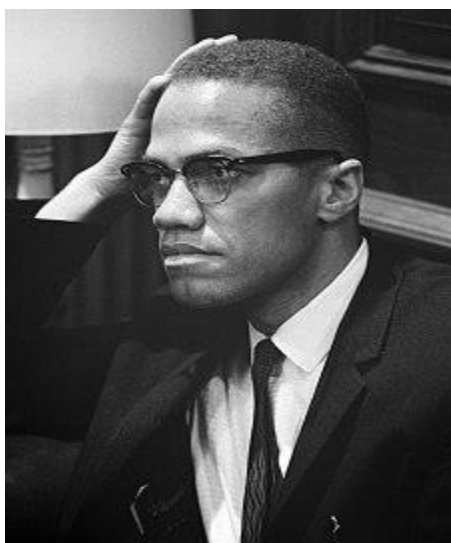
by Md. Mahmudul Hasan on October 4, 2020 in Research

I came across Malcolm X's *The Autobiography* (1965) rather incidentally. Once I was having a conversation with Malaysian academic and public intellectual Mohd. Kamal Hassan who pointed out to me that it could be a good text for discussion in a literature class. That struck a chord with me.

I procured a copy of, and began reading, *The Autobiography*. During the few days I spent poring over its pages, I had an experience of reticence. I did not talk much. I found it hard to process what Malcolm X was talking about in the book.

The Autobiography describes how black people in America have historically been under attack by white supremacist groups, including the Ku Klux Klan and rogue elements in the police. In 1931 when Malcolm X was 6, his father Earl Little was murdered presumably by white racists. Among the six siblings of Earl Little, "only one ... [died] in bed."

Regarding his father's death, Malcolm X says: "My mother was taken by the police to the hospital, and to a room where a sheet was over my father in a bed, and she wouldn't look, she was afraid to look.... My father's skull, on one side, was crushed in.... His body was cut almost in half."



Malcolm X's mother Louise Little was widowed with seven children to support, and poverty and racism to fight. All these had a toll on her life, especially in the exercise of her role as a mother. In 1939 the state of Michigan declared her insane and incapable of taking care of her children. She was committed to a state-run mental hospital to be released 26 years later. Her children, including Malcolm X, were "split up and sent to different foster homes."

Malcolm X did very well in school, "received good grades and even was elected class president." One day his well-meaning English teacher, Mr. Ostrowski asked him about his career aspiration. Malcolm X said: "I'd like to be a lawyer." There was no black lawyer in Lansing, Michigan for him to emulate. All Malcolm X "knew for certain was that a lawyer didn't wash dishes, as [he] was doing."

Mr. Ostrowski said: "Malcolm, one of life's first needs is for us to be realistic. Don't misunderstand me, now.... A lawyer – that's no realistic goal for a nigger.... Why don't you plan on carpentry?"

That was the "first major turning point" in Malcolm X's life. His dream of becoming "whatever [he] wanted to be" was shattered. He left school and ended up in New York where he became engaged in "criminal activities, drugs, and violence" and the rest is history.

After a major metamorphosis in his life, he eventually became arguably America's most important black leader. It was said that he was the only black man in America who "could stop a race riot – or start one." About the roots of "riots and lawlessness" that are often associated with African-Americans, Malcolm X says: "The reason is that the cause of these riots, the racist malignancy in America, has been too long unattended."

In the final years of his life, Malcolm X skyrocketed to prominence. He became the spokesperson for the early Black Power movement, in some ways the predecessor of the current Black Lives Matter campaign.



Realising Malcolm X's importance as a historical figure, in 1963 journalist Alex Haley approached him with the idea of writing his autobiography. Initially, Malcolm X "was both reluctant and skeptical." Eventually, he agreed and Haley had long interviews with him which eventually morphed into *The Autobiography*.

As a community leader, Malcolm X had to deal with police brutality against black people. Once, in New York, two police officers beat up a black man named Hinton with nightsticks; his "scalp was split open." Malcolm X rushed to the "police precinct house," demanded to see Hinton and sought to ensure his proper medical treatment.

At first the police denied that Hinton was there, and then refused to let Malcolm X see him. Finally, seeing a large crowd gathered outside the facility, they became "nervous" and relented.

Malcolm X describes Hinton's condition thus: "He was only semi-conscious. Blood had bathed his head and face and shoulders" and later "a steel plate [had] to be put into [his] skull." He sums up the Hinton incident, stating: "Hundreds of Harlem Negroes had seen, and hundreds of thousands of them had later heard how we had shown that almost anything could be accomplished by black men who would face the white man without fear."

In US history, police violence against black people is not only a twenty-first century phenomenon. Some may regard greater awareness of and concern about it as progress. Others may deem Barack Obama's presidency and career successes of the likes of Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, Ben Carson or Oprah Winfrey as great strides in racial equality.

However, Malcolm X would not have regarded such extraneous developments as progress. In a television interview in March 1964, he said: "If you stick a knife nine inches into my back and pull it out six inches, there's no progress. If you pull it all the way out, that's not progress. Progress is healing the wound that the blow made. And they haven't even pulled the knife out much less heal the wound. They won't even admit the knife is there."

Unlawful police killings are an extreme manifestation – although still only the tip of an iceberg – of continuing, systemic racial injustices in America. Knowing Afro-American history and US race relations is important to understand what crystallizes police violence against African-Americans.

Malcolm X's *The Autobiography* (1965) is of great help in reading this history. It narrates a black man's search for identity in an anti-black society.

American filmmaker Shelton Jackson Lee rightly said about the book: "It changed the way I thought; it changed the way I acted. It has given me courage that I didn't know I had inside me." For weeks after I read *The Autobiography*, my eyes were glued to the computer screen as I was listening to, and taken by, Malcolm X's speeches on YouTube.

One of the greatest orators in US history, Malcolm X was brutally assassinated on 21 February 1965, before his 40th birthday. The assassination happened at Audubon Ballroom in Harlem, New York where he was giving a speech; some of his family members, including Attallah Shabazz (1958-) who was six years old at that time, were there in the audience. During my last trip to the US in 2017, I went to Harlem to see the place of his assassination. Sadly, it was a Saturday and Audubon Ballroom was closed.

Today's America badly needs a leader like Malcolm X who was correct in his diagnosis and treatment of the social disease of racism, as articulated in *The Autobiography*.

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