



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Speaking From The Margins: Rhetorical Strategies And Techniques Used In *The Autobiography Of Malcolm X*

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ABSTRACT

In every social system, there exists a power play. For those who are powerful; language, religion and discourse are the tools to retain their power. They occupy the center by creating a boundary around them beyond which there is no access for certain groups. Though an interdisciplinary concept, marginality is widely discussed in the field of post-colonial literature and in studies regarding race and ethnicity. Often along with content, the structural aspects of a text play a crucial role in deciding its place in the literary domain. This paper is an attempt to read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as a text about breaking the margins with special reference to its rhetorical strategies and techniques.

KEY WORDS

Marginalization, racism, identity, Malcolm X, margin, power relations, racial binary, resistance, transformation, self realization, Rhetoric.

INTRODUCTION

Humankind is inherently social. Every aspect of our life is woven through the intricate web of social structures. All these structures are carefully patterned and glued together by power relations, which in turn centers its existence on the concepts of domination and subordination. The power imbalance helps in the smooth functioning of a society, for power structures to an extent, brings out and organized unity among people of various objectives and mindset. Decision making gets much more effective under the guidance of a clear authority and this centralized power helps to maintain law, services and social commitment. But power is like a two-edged sword, a portion that is both poison and antidote. As much as power brings out a peaceful, well balanced social system there is no problem but too much of a centralized power leads to corruption, abuse and exploitation that often stems out of a sense of non-answerability.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X is a powerful testimony pertaining to the concepts of power politics and marginalization. Co-authored with Alex Haley, the Pulitzer Prize winner of the year 1977, the work portrays the sequence of his life journey from a young African American in the racially volatile America to a revolutionary leader of the American Black Nationalist Movement. This work is significant while discussing centralized power allocation and margin because more than a political autobiography, it is also a blueprint of the internal marginalization the African Americans had faced in many dimensions.

MALCOLM X AND HIS RHETORICS

Growing up in a racially oppressive environment, Malcolm was a first-hand victim to racial Fanaticism. Thus, it was no surprise he rose as a paragon of resistance and reformation. His passionate words were sharp enough to cut through the American consciousness deep enough to challenge the deep routed systemic racism and the snail paced so called 'revolutionary pulses'. His tone and style were assertive, urgent, confrontational, charismatic and persuasive. Malcolm did not mince words, thus while his honesty was uncomfortable for the most part yet it was up to the point. His words, as one delves into his lengthy autobiography, seems to find a sense of urgency, edge and fire which reflected the frustration of many black Americans who had realized the extent of deception they were subjected to. Malcolm's language is the language of black experience in America; defiant and rebellious which had been the true sentiments of a section of American society. Malcolm X was as complex a man as his words, As Archie C Epps states in her "*The Rhetorics of Malcolm X*; " An analysis of Malcolm X's language is a way to begin to understand his thoughts. His conception of society and history were often hidden behind imagery" (67).

The Autobiography of Malcolm X, more than the raw reflection of the eventful life journey of Malcolm, is a testimony against the systematic racism and exclusion the blacks have faced in America. As mentioned before, his raw, honest and thought-provoking Rhetoric commands the attention and demands people to see the ingrained Marginalization as it really was. Throughout the work he is justly speaking from the margins.

MALCOM AND MARGIN

Marginalization is a systemic term, which holds a central position when one talks about power relations and social structure. In a centralized power system along with a center there exists a margin which is more complex than the center itself. While the center focuses solely on maintaining the power, those who occupies the margin either becomes a target of the center to exercise their power on or they try to gain power to slowly move away from the margin and over throw the center by challenging it. Explaining it in terms of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the subalterns always occupy the margin, for they lack access to have a grip on the social structure they are a part of. (104)

Marginalization or marginality is a cross disciplinary term which was developed in the course of time by numerous literary and critical traditions. Though the base concept was introduced by Robert E Park in his paper "*Human Migration and the Marginal Man*" (1928), later it became a crucial term in many literary and critical domains. Robert Park through his work comes up with a particular view point, where he projects migration as the reason a 'marginal man' came to exist. Focusing on ethnic groups in the context of migration, he explains how a margin is formed within the society, beyond which, certain groups are pushed to feel alienated both by the society and by their own mind. According to Park, "One of the consequences of migration is to create a situation in which the same individual-who may or may not be a mixed blood-finds himself striving to live in two diverse cultural groups. The effect is to produce an unstable character-a personality type with characteristic forms of behavior. This is the "marginal man." It is in the mind of the marginal man that the conflicting cultures meet and fuse. It is, therefore, in the mind of the marginal man that the process of civilization is visibly going on, and it is in the mind of the marginal man that the process of civilization may best be studied"(881).

Here Malcolm X is the Marginal man; a man who lived his early years in the margins of a racially oppressive society, a mixed blood who gradually found himself questioning the stereotypical life he was living and in his mind. The conflicting ideas of race and faith clashed which later transformed and at the end transcended him from the margin. But there he had found himself in another margin, a margin that existed within the central power he had dedicated his life and efforts for. His autobiography is his testimony regarding this struggle between remaining in the margin and trying to break it. Strategically written, this personal yet highly political manifesto shows a craftsmanship that is sharp and well-aimed, as it is written to resonate, to provoke, to disturb the minds of the reader and drive an action out of it.

All throughout the work, more than the idea of systemic racism, it is the concept of Marginalization on multiple levels that is highlighted, especially internal marginalization. The rhetoric and techniques Malcolm has employed in it is crucial in foregrounding it. The autobiographical narrative style and the linear flow shows how marginalization is not just isolated incidents but a reality that follows some people for their entire life in one form or another. His account of being treated differently by both his father and mother is an instance of internal marginalization, for he was favored by his father for his lighter skin tone among his other siblings as he was despised by his mother for that. Though working for the liberation of the black,

Malcolm's father liked his son's lighter skin tone, better projects the inherent colonial mindset that is impossible to erase along with how the sense of a margin was created even at a familial level.

The earlier chapters showcase the raw picture regarding the marginalization the blacks have faced and his prison years is written in a way which projects a sense of helplessness and innocence regarding the way of the world as far as black Americans are concerned. He was powerless to decide the flow and direction of his life when he was treated differently in the family, separated from his mother and siblings, discouraged from his ambition because of his skin colour and when he was thrust into a life of burglary, women trafficking and armed robbery. Till here Malcolm is portrayed as a representative of all those unfortunate black youth who were thrust into a pre constructed social system which had already assigned the societal roles to everyone. The roles expected of the blacks were as following;

“Back when I was growing up, the 'successful' Lansing Negroes were such as waiters and bootblacks. To be a janitor at some downtown store was to be highly respected. The real 'elite', the 'big shots', the 'voices of the race', were the waiters at the Lansing Country Club and the shoeshine boys at the state capitol. The only Negroes who really had any money were the ones in the numbers racket, or who ran the gambling houses, or who in some other way lived parasitically off the poorest ones, who were the masses.” (84)

These jobs were designated to the margins while the prestigious ones were for the 'civilized'. This self-depreciating mindset was injected even at a tender age, for Malcolm says about his childhood impression of their own land and people as “I somehow never thought, then, of the black people in Africa. My image of Africa, at that time, was of naked savages, cannibals, monkeys and tigers and steaming jungles” (85). At such a social setting no ordinary black had a respectable future goal or expectations. But the later chapters about his prison life and religious conversion projects a transformation, the first stage of his personal evolution from Malcolm Little and Detroit Red to Malcolm X.

Here a reader could feel a sense of realization, the first breach in the conditioned mind, the first step out of the margin he was living till then, followed by a long and in-depth journey of self-awareness, and empowerment where he is guided by the Nation of Islam and Elijah Muhammad. This second phase shows how margins are not static and marginalized people are not passive recipients of a system but independent agents, capable of transforming themselves and challenge the central system, even overthrowing them.

Here this transformation is highlighted as a symbol of resistance against marginalization and systemic racism. His brilliant usage of contrasts and juxtapositions forces the reader to constantly remember the binary between black and white Americans, teachings of Nation of Islam to established Christianity and Elijah Muhammad and the White God. Here Malcolm is cleverly using the Saidian Binary opposition, the strategy the Europeans used in colonialism, against the whites by constantly projecting the difference between black and white as if asking the readers to take a side, thus correlating it with his earlier life and later philosophy.

In the last chapters Malcolm's conflict with Elijah Muhammad and his leaving from Nation of Islam shows how margins could exist within a system itself. Elijah loves Malcolm but only as a tool and a blind follower of his words. He had put himself in the center and aligned his followers including Malcolm in its periphery. But the moment Malcolm started to doubt his ideals and the cause of the institution, he knew his position was in danger. Malcolm was rapidly gaining acceptance and respect among the public which terrified him, for he was afraid the margins he built in pretense of liberating Black Americans will collapse if Malcolm and his Muslim Mosque Inc. were to grow further and it was the same fear which led them to end the legacy of Malcolm X forever. Here the power Nation of Islam bestowed upon him was a bait to limit his growth within the margin, Elijah had fixed but Malcolm gave his life trying to break it. His transformation from Malcolm X to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz shows this fight against internal marginalization.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RHETORIC

The Autobiography of Malcolm X is noticed for both its content and structural techniques. Malcolm employs brilliant rhetoric and literary techniques not only to tell the story of his life but to persuade people to think, and make them react against the unjustifiable white dominated order of the western world which is built on the cost of people like him. The work challenges the dominant narratives about race, identity, culture and identity which all hails the whitewashed history of the whites against that of many who occupied the margin, thus could not fit in to the frame of historical and literary texts. As discussed in the earlier section, the work is constructed in a way which reflects the evolution of Malcolm X from an innocent, oblivious

victim of a devious social system to a brave, clever international human-right activist through the path of realization, religious conversion, enlightenment, and self-discovery and at last resistance.

That transformation is strategically reflected in the language of the narrative as well. The first section of the work is written using the local slang which is suitable for Malcolm Little and Detroit Red, not Malcolm X. As the work progresses the slang also gets refined to suit Malcolm X and at the end it transforms into something suitable for El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, a wise and dignified leader. This change in language confirms this transformation of his identity and self because it was education, wisdom and experiences which had come along to him in his journey of personal growth, which those who occupied the margins never gained. The importance of education and access to the mainstream could be read along the lines for it highlights the emotional turmoil of the marginalization.

Along with language the tone also shifts all throughout the book from obliviousness, anger and bitterness to realization, reflection, defiance and hope. This shift gives this a humane touch, making it more believable and multidimensional. The transparency and brutal honesty he keeps throughout the work by speaking about his past, drug use, women trafficking, burglary, armed robbery, prison life etc., not only enhances the credibility of it but also makes him less an idol and more human. The aforementioned writing techniques and rhetoric command the attention of the readers till the very end and his narration on family disintegration, racial violence, poverty and oppression tugs at the emotional strings of people thus probing out the feelings of empathy and fury. As much the language is urgent, blunt, sharp and persuasive yet it is also logically structured and argumentative. Each argument he put forth is logically structured to appeal people's brain as well. As much as his transformation from Malcolm Little and Detroit Red to Malcolm X and El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz symbolises his personal and spiritual growth addressing the aspect of his identity. He left his first two identities behind for it was the identity of the colonial margin he was trapped in during his early life. Little was a slave name, binding him with the institution of slavery, and Detroit Red was someone the white dominated society expected him, and the black youth in general, to be. Later he adapted X as his surname, thus leaving both these marginal identities behind. Malcolm X was a preacher who preached the ideals of an institution and its shepherd who kept him in another margin for a long time. It was only El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, who was independent of any margins, thus the only identity he truly embraced. Malcolm's rhetorical style and techniques thus encourages self-quest, critical thought and pride in black identity.

CONCLUSION

A gripping narrative of identity and transformation, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* has a significant role in marking Malcolm X in this world. The work has helped the world to unravel Malcolm X and his eventful life, more than his public figure as a African American revolutionary and a human right activist. Though his personal transformation is the book's backbone, it is also a powerful political manifesto highlighting the racial marginalization the black Americans face in the land that is rightfully theirs as well. With vivid and brutal imagery and powerful rhetoric he keeps a grip on the emotion and minds of the reader and persuades them to think in his favor. The powerful rhetoric and techniques are the crucial factors in making the work significant in multiple dimensions.

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