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MALCOLM X AND THE FAIR SEX: REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN MALCOLM X'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY¹

This paper discusses the attitudes of Malcolm X towards women as they are mirrored in his autobiography (written in cooperation with a renowned African American writer, Alex Haley) from 1965. It explores the extent to which the public image of Malcolm X's gender stance that we get from his political speeches and pronouncements is comparable to the one brought about by his life story. Malcolm X's comments on women in *The Autobiography* can be divided into two groups – general remarks about women and depictions of particular women from X's life. The first set of Malcolm X's observations on the fair sex is explicitly misogynist and thus in accordance with his public persona's nationalist politics. Even if the second group of comments – that linked with X's mother, sister, wife and two girlfriends from his pre-conversion period – reflects more complexity and ambiguity, it still unfortunately does not fully succeed in overcoming the limits of binary and prejudicial thinking regarding females.

In his article "Inventing and Interpreting Malcolm X", Michael Eric Dyson calls for a more objective assessment of Malcolm X's persona than that which scholars have so far produced. In Dyson's understanding, more balanced criticism of Malcolm X would provide a better perspective of both this leader's strengths and weaknesses and thus complicate him as a multi-dimensional human being. As Dyson suggests: "We must forsake uncritical celebrations, not by denying his myth, but by taking it into account [...] and in so doing understand our need to romanticize or revile him" (1996: 52). One of the areas in the scholarship on Malcolm X that, according to Dyson, urgently needs revisiting is Malcolm X's attitude towards women as manifested in his various public statements and in his autobiography. A number of black feminists, including bell hooks, Angela Davis and Patricia Hill Collins,² have answered Dyson's call and have written on Malcolm X from a feminist perspective. Surprisingly, however, rather than strongly critiquing Malcolm X's sexist politics, the feminists have, more often than not, tried to "save" Malcolm X by suggesting that had he lived longer, he would have come to espouse a more egalitarian view of gender relations.³

Moreover, it might come as a bit of surprise, perhaps, that most scholars who have touched upon Malcolm X's gender attitudes have done so almost solely through the analysis of various Malcolm X's speeches and public pronouncements. Few have taken as a source of their exploration Malcolm X's life story.⁴ Since I consider *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* a solid document reflecting many important aspects of X's personality, it is my aim in this paper to use this work as a terrain in which to explore X's representation of women characters. The paper's goal is to shed some light on the question of whether Malcolm X's public claims about women are in accordance with the manner in which women are represented in his autobiography. Such an approach might also clarify the role of Alex Haley as a ghost writer of X's autobiography – an issue not too many scholars have touched upon so far – and the extent to which the Malcolm X presented to us by *The Autobiography* is really Haley's narrative creation.⁵

One can divide the depictions of women in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* into two areas. The first area consists of X's remarks pertaining to women in general and the second of the descriptions of and the comments on the concrete women in X's life. Some of the typical representations of the more general remarks on women include: "All women, by their nature, are fragile and weak: they are attracted to the male in whom they see strength" (180), or "I'd had too much experience that women were only tricky, deceitful, untrustworthy flesh [...] Women talked too much" (326). What these comments reflect, above all, is Malcolm X's negative stereotyping of women and his essentialist belief in gender differences. The fact that X uses words like *all* or *only* in the above quotations mirrors the absolutist parameters of his thinking. It might be rather astounding at first sight that a man who has spent a large portion of his life analyzing and denouncing racism in the United States, does not seem to realize the dangers of prejudicial and essentialist thinking when it comes to gender.

In order to understand why Malcolm X thought about women the way he did, it is necessary to place him in a more general context of the period in which he lived. By now, it is a well-known fact that the inner city environment from which Malcolm X sprang was misogynist and that the whole of the American society of the fifties and the sixties was still largely sexist (Locke 2002: 23). In addition, Malcolm X was an advocate of Black Nationalist philosophy (and its more particular quasi-Islamic form) which both "counter[ed] racism and construct[ed] utopian and repressive gender relations" (White, qtd. in Griffin 2001: 219). Black Nationalism offered "a masculinist analysis of Black oppression" (Collins 1992: 77) and conflated "Blackness, masculinity, and political astuteness" (76). According to Dyson, "the demonology of the Nation of Islam [...] 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" (1995: 10). When taking into account the above-mentioned contexts, Malcolm X's claims about women make him truly (and unfortunately) a man of his time.

Some scholars have suggested that Malcolm X underwent a significant change in his thinking about women towards the end of his life (as a result of his travels

around the world) and offer excerpts from his 1964 Paris interview⁶ to support their claim. During the interview Malcolm X states that in a society “the degree of progress can never be separated from the woman” (qtd. in Collins 1992: 79). Collins, however, is correct in pointing out that although the claims made during the interview lack the previous stark negativism associated with women, they still limit “women to the traditionally feminine spheres of family and education” and are thus sexist (97). In addition, Malcolm X’s autobiography does not at all seem to reflect the suggested change in his approach to the gender problematic. Depicting his trip to Beirut in 1964, X still associates, in a superficial and sexist way, “the street attire and attitude of [...] women” with a country’s “moral strength, or its moral weakness” (463). Criticism of the “liberty” and “boldness” – “traits [...] reserved for men” – that X links with the Lebanese women he encounters in Beirut prove that X’s “basic classificatory scheme for women remained intact” at the end of his life (Collins 1992: 76).

Let me now move towards Malcolm X’s depiction of certain women in his autobiography. Among the women that occupy most space in the autobiography are Malcolm X’s mother, Louise, his sister, Ella, and his wife, Betty, in addition to the two women from his pre-conversion period – one black, Laura, and one white, Sophia. I would like to argue that Malcolm X’s descriptions of these particular characters are tainted with sexist attitudes similar to those discussed above, even though they at times lack the absolutism of his general comments on women and bring with them more ambivalence and complexity (if not always outright praise and respect). When talking about his parents, Malcolm X does not manage to escape the binary opposition of qualities stereotypically associated with maleness and femaleness. Whereas he attributes to his father the masculine traits of bigness, strength and toughness, X identifies his mother with religiosity and hysteria (Collins 1992: 62). X clearly portrays his father (in particular, his calling of a preacher and a nationalist) as a role model and his father’s martyr-like death as a precursor to X’s own awaiting destiny. On the other hand, X seems to value his mother primarily for her fulfillment of the “feminine” roles of a housewife and a mother. As he puts it: “My mother at this time seemed to be always working – cooking, washing, ironing, cleaning, and fussing over us eight children” (86). If the father’s death creates a mythic paradigm for X’s own life, X’s mother’s long-term psychic illness lurches in Malcolm X’s mind as a persistent problem that he tries to shut out for most of his life.

Malcolm X’s sexist attitudes also come through when he explains his mother’s higher education, rather than his father’s patriarchal values, as a source of his physical abuse of her. In his own words: “An educated woman, I suppose, can’t resist the temptation to correct an uneducated man” (82). In X’s eyes, then, the educated woman clearly becomes a threat to a man’s sense of manhood and therefore needs to be “disciplined”. X falls into the essentialist talk about gender without realizing its social dangers for the African American community and the society in general. By fully justifying his father’s physical violence towards his mother, Malcolm X unconsciously weakens and contradicts his argument about

the injustice of white society's violence towards the black community, as if not realizing the existence of a parallel between racial and gender oppression (Collins 1992: 79). He "fails to see the ways in which sexism grants men a similar illegitimate or immoral authority to engage in violence against women" (Collins 1992: 81).

What Malcolm X perceives as a positive trait of his mother is her strongly developed sense of pride which she tries hard to preserve after her husband's death. Although Malcolm X openly expresses his love for and gratitude to his mother in the main text of *The Autobiography*,⁷ one needs to look outside it, in the Epilogue, to find the expression of X's tacit admiration of his mother's ability to survive (102). Haley quotes Malcolm X as follows: "We had dinner with our mother for the first time in all those years! [...] She's sixty-six, and her memory is better than mine and she looks young and healthy" (21). Also, the information that the Epilogue provides of the memory of X's mother as the ignition for the whole story of X's life might be seen as testifying to an important role Louise Little had played in X's life. According to Kevin Everod Quashie, "this moment [memory of X's mother] is crucial, because it introduces Louise Little's politics of survival as resonant in Malcolm's memory and perhaps influential in his own political development" (1999: 48). And yet, what Quashie sees as problematic about the depiction of X's mother in his life story is "the indelible presence Louise Little has in *Autobiography* and her simultaneous absence from many parts of the text" (48). One can read this "ghostly presence" (60) of X's mother in the text as a confirmation of X's sexism which leads to "the erasure of women from textual spaces that they, women, help to make possible" (49).

If X's depiction of his mother seems to be rather ambivalent (both trying to confine the mother in the stereotypically feminine space and at the same time give tribute to her pride and strength, both trying to include her in the text and erase her from it), a similar attitude is present in X's description of Ella. In a sense, after the separation of the Little family, Ella becomes Malcolm X's surrogate mother. If X saw in a positive light his mother's pride as a source of refusal of anyone's charity, he explicitly praises Ella for another kind of pride – that linked with her racial heritage. He describes Ella as "the first really proud black woman I had ever seen in my life. She was plainly proud of her very dark skin" (114). Ella represents the exception to the stereotypically feminine woman. X characterizes her as "big, outspoken and impressive" (121). Although Malcolm X seems intrigued and impressed by Ella's dynamic and active nature, he also criticizes her inability to make a good wife. As he remarks: "I could see [...] how any average man would find it impossible to live for very long with a woman whose every instinct was to run everything and everybody she had anything to do with" (121). Rather than fully acknowledging Ella's self-sufficient and, what might be seen as, progressive feminist agency, X points to her deficiency in fulfilling a role a patriarchal society has prescribed for her.

Rather than using the example of Ella to change his overall opinion about the proper role of women in society, X feels the need to give tribute to her skills in

the feminine sphere of the kitchen. He remembers: "Ella [...] was truly a Georgia Negro woman when she got into the kitchen with her pots and pans. She was the kind of cook who would heap up your plate with such as ham hock, greens, black-eyed peas, fried fish, cabbage, sweet potatoes, grits and gravy, and cornbread. And the more you put away, the better she felt" (121). Malcolm accepts Ella as a sister and a surrogate mother of a sort and expresses gratitude for her financial support of X's trip to Mecca. One might question, however, whether X sees her as a representative of what the black woman of the future should act like. After all, Ella never persists in her role of a wife and never comes to fulfill her role of a mother. Moreover, Malcolm X's general conviction was that "any woman who dominated a man [...] would also destroy him" (Locke 2002: 23). Strong and, in Malcolm X's eyes, dominating women (like Ella) were socially dangerous, because of their potential to emasculate and disempower black men.

If Ella does not represent all the traits X associates with "true" and "proper" femininity, X's wife Betty does. Rather than spending too much time talking about Betty's personality and exceptionality as an individual, X rather briefly describes her as a "good Muslim woman and wife" and cites these characteristics as the reason for his love of her (334). If one accepts Collins's Eve-Madonna dichotomy as a way of understanding Malcolm X's perception and representation of women, then Betty stands, more often than not, on the Madonna side of the dichotomy. She fulfills the Madonna definition by being one of those "archetypical wives and mothers who sacrifice everything for their husbands and children" (Collins 1992: 76)⁸. Although Malcolm X gives due respect to Betty's understanding, tolerance and support, he refuses to depict her in his life story as a full human being. In tune with the Nation of Islam's teachings, X virtually desexualizes Betty and ultimately conflates her with her responsibilities as his assistant, wife and the bearer of their children. Paradoxically, it is from Haley's epilogue that the reader learns more about the nature of X's and Betty's marriage than from the main text of the autobiography. If X devotes little space to Betty in the text of his life story, he gives even less attention to their daughters. One cannot escape wondering whether, had Betty and Malcolm X had a son, his presence in the text would have been equally scarce as is the case with their female children.

I think that Malcolm X conceived the story about Laura mainly as a way to present the readers with his repentance for the sins of his past life. X tries to convince the reading public of his feelings of guilt for the degradation of this originally promising young woman into a prostitute, alcoholic and drug-addict. As he says: "One of the shames I have carried for years is that I blame myself for all of this" (154). When read between the lines, however, it is precisely this story that mirrors the depths of Malcolm X's sexist beliefs and attitudes rather than his fair understanding of women. Even if X admits that he participated in Laura's downward spiral, he also seems to believe that Laura had some "subsurface potential" to become a prostitute which he had only helped to activate (148). As he suggests: "I wish I had known then [what] to look for in Laura's face" (148). The belief that some women are by nature determined to live the life of a prostitute is

highly misogynist and seems to neglect the serious social reasons for the existence of prostitution in economically disadvantaged communities. If X's book provides a detailed social analysis of the reasons that lead a black man to live the life of hustling, pimping and burglary, it fails to do the same with the specifically female predicament. The implication of Laura's story in the context of the autobiography seems to be that whereas racism of the dominating white society turns a young black man into a criminal, it is some kind of an internal tendency that transforms a young black woman into a prostitute.⁹

The last female figure I will discuss in this essay is Sophia, Malcolm X's white lover from his pre-conversion period. If one can see Betty as desexualized in Malcolm X's depiction of her, then one can say exactly the opposite in the case of Sophia. In *The Autobiography*, Sophia becomes the very embodiment of white female sexuality, or, as X would probably put it, white female lust for black male body. Although X does not deny his physical attraction to Sophia (he describes her as "almost too fine to believe" (152)), he stresses her function in his life as a status symbol when he says: "I paraded her. The Negro men loved her" (152). In his article "Prison, Perversion, and Pimps", Terri Hume Oliver claims that in the books like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, the white woman "pose[s] a threat to black masculinity by being able to wield more power in their relationship" (2002: 150). Oliver sees as "the symbol for the transfer of power" from a man to a woman the automobile ("the ubiquitous phallic symbol") in which Sophia drives Malcolm X around Boston (159). I consider this reading of Sophia as "the predatory figure of the white temptress" highly problematic (162). It seems to me that it is not Sophia, but Malcolm X who is a real dominating partner in their relationship. We learn that X physically abuses Sophia "just to keep her in line" and that he demands that she financially support him (226).¹⁰ X's confidence in saying that he knew that Sophia "wasn't even thinking about not coming back" (226) and that "Sophia would do anything I said" (233) hardly confirms Oliver's opinion about the male-female power reversal in X's and Sophia's relationship.

It is hard to determine what keeps Sophia in the long-term relationship with Malcolm X and even propels her to participate in the burglaries with him, if X's account of his dealings with her is accurate. Be it love or an incredibly strong sexual desire that Sophia feels for Malcolm,¹¹ it is X in the end who predatorily feeds on the relationship (and not Sophia). Even in retrospect, Malcolm X sees Sophia only as a privileged member of the racist white society the connections with whom bring him a long prison sentence and not at all as a victim of his own patriarchal and sexist practices. The only point with which I agree in Oliver's argumentation is that Malcolm X's relationship with Sophia, due to the way in which the U.S. society has perceived interracial sex between black men and white women, presents a physical danger for him. This danger indeed materializes when Sophia's husband comes to look for Malcolm X and when X gets a longer sentence in prison precisely because he had engaged in interracial sex. Only in the indirect sense just explained does Malcolm X become Sophia's victim.

The above discussion has attempted to show that Malcolm X's sexist attitudes and the inability to view gender relations in a more progressive way are present not only in his speeches and public announcements, but also in his own life story. Malcolm X's misogynist attitudes are most easily traceable in *The Autobiography* in the area of his general remarks about women, but can also be found in his depictions of the female characters who were closest to him, such as his mother, sister, wife and white lover. Although in the case of the concrete women, Malcolm X sometimes adds a degree of complexity to the characters he describes, he nevertheless seems unable to break free entirely from his patriarchal and misogynist way of thinking in relation to them. This also suggests that Haley's crafting of Malcolm X's persona in *The Autobiography*, regarding X's attitudes towards women, basically preserves X's image available from his political speeches and public appearances.

Notes

- ¹ I would like to thank Professor Jeffrey Sammons from New York University for his insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper.
- ² See bell hooks's "Sitting at the Feet of the Messenger: Remembering Malcolm X", Angela Davis's "Meditations on the Legacy of Malcolm X" and Patricia Hill Collins's "Learning to Think for Ourselves: Malcolm X's Black Nationalism Revisited". For more information on the link between Malcolm X and Black Feminism, see also Eugene Victor's Wolfenstein's article "Reflections on Malcolm X and Black Feminism".
- ³ Probably the strongest denouncement of Malcolm X's sexism comes from Kevin Everod Quashie who writes that the subject of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* "at the very best reflects immaturity and [...] at worst [...] his participation in the maintenance of a system of gender oppression that undermined his own revolutionary practices" (41).
- ⁴ Quashie has used the example of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* to prove his claim that although Malcolm X's gender politics as reflected in his life story are hardly compatible with feminism, yet the text "reflects Black feminist textualities on two levels: one, in the temperament of its collaborative authorship; and two, in its engagement of [...] interior tropes of activism" (1999: 41).
- ⁵ The phenomenon of ghosted autobiographies has a long and complicated history in African American literary tradition, reaching all the way back to slave narratives. For more information on this, see John Sekora's "Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative". One of the few people who comment on Haley's function in *The Autobiography* is John Edgar Wideman. See his essay "Malcolm X: The Art of Autobiography" for a rather positive assessment of Haley's role and achievement in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.
- ⁶ For an excerpt from the interview, see Griffin on p. 225.
- ⁷ At one point, he says: "As bad as I was, as much trouble and worry as I caused my mother, I loved her" (97), or later, he describes his mother as "the woman who had brought me into the world, and nursed me, and advised me, and chastised me, and loved me" (102).
- ⁸ Collins gives the following definition of women as Eves: "Some women were Eves – deceptive temptresses who challenged male authority, often by using their sexuality for their own gain" (74). Even if most of the comments referring to Betty confirm her Madonna-like nature in X's perception, at one point Malcolm X admits he thinks Betty might have manipulated him into the marriage through her Eve-like "powers". Talking about their romance, he says:

- “I have never been able to shake it out of my mind that she knew something – all the time. Maybe she did get me!” (333). Even though Malcolm X’s own stereotypes fail him (Betty figures as both Madonna and Eve within a few pages of the text), he seems incapable to deconstruct the stereotypes and reveal their constructed nature.
- ⁹ In relation to Laura, Malcolm X also says that “learning to hate the men who bought her, she also became a Lesbian” (154). What this quotation suggests is X’s belief that homosexual orientation can be a matter of a conscious personal choice and not only a biological predisposition. In his article “The Color of His Eyes”, Arnold Rampersad talks about Malcolm X’s own possible homosexuality. Rampersad suggests that “elements of [X’s] homoerotic desire [...] led both to the idealization of women and to misogyny when women failed to live up to his near-impossible ideals” (133).
- ¹⁰ Robin D. G. Kelley reads Malcolm X’s behavior in this respect as a typical demonstration of X’s identification with the hipster subculture of which he was a part at the time of his relationship with Sophia. According to Kelley, in the eyes of hustlers “white women [...] were merely property to be possessed, sported, used and tossed out” (170). They “were regarded as stolen property [originally belonging to the white man], booty seized from the ultimate hustle” (Kelley 170). One could, as some scholars have done, also read Sophia as the ultimate symbol of X’s self-hatred and his beating of her as a way of defeating demons (see, for example, Nancy Clasby’s “The Autobiography of Malcolm X: A Mythic Paradigm” or Crispin Sartwell’s *Act Like You Know: African-American Autobiography & White Identity* (1998)).
- ¹¹ Crispin Sartwell would probably interpret Sophia’s desire for Malcolm X as her need for re-embodiment. For more information, see Sartwell’s chapter on Malcolm X in *Act Like You Know: African-American Autobiography & White Identity*.

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