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- *Life of the Author*
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by

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CONTENTS

LIFE OF THE AUTHOR	5
LIST OF CHARACTERS	12
CRITICAL COMMENTARIES	18
Chapters 1-3	18
Chapters 4-7	26
Chapters 8-12	30
Chapters 13-16	36
Chapters 17-19	43
THREE ASSESSMENTS OF MALCOLM	48
Alex Haley: Epilogue	48
M. S. Handler: Introduction	57
Ossie Davis: On Malcolm X	57
CHARACTER ANALYSES	58
Malcolm X	58
Elijah Muhammad	61
Reverend Earl Little	62
Louise Little	63
Ella	63
Reginald	64
Betty X	65
Shorty	65
Sammy	66
Laura	66
Sophia	67

REVIEW QUESTIONS	67
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	68

Autobiography of Malcolm X Notes

LIFE OF THE AUTHOR

Malcolm X was born Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska, on May 19, 1925; he dropped the "slave name" Little and adopted the initial X (representing an unknown) when he became a member of the Nation of Islam. Malcolm was the seventh of his father's nine children—three by a previous marriage—and his mother's fourth child. His father, Reverend Earl Little, was a Baptist minister and an organizer for Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, a black separatist "back-to-Africa" group of the 1920s.

Most of Malcolm's early life was spent in and about Lansing, Michigan, where the family lived on a farm. Although the Little family was poor, they were self-sufficient until Reverend Little's death in 1931. After this, family unity began to dissolve: first Malcolm, who had become a discipline problem, was sent to live with another family in 1937; and later that year, Mrs. Little suffered a severe nervous breakdown and was sent to the state mental hospital. The other children became wards of the state.

Malcolm's defiant behavior toward authority remained a problem, and at thirteen, he was sent to the Michigan State Detention Home, bound for reform school. At the detention home, he received favored treatment (as a "mascot" of the white couple who operated the home), and rather than being sent on to reform school, he remained in the home through the eighth grade.

In junior high school, Malcolm became an outstanding student and was very popular with his schoolmates. But his world was upset in the eighth grade when his English teacher advised him not to try to become a lawyer, because he was "a nigger." He became despondent and his schoolwork suffered. Finally he asked to be transferred to the custody of his half-sister Ella, who

lived in Boston. The request was granted, and he arrived in Boston in the spring of 1941.

In Boston, Malcolm found himself more attracted to the street life in the ghetto than to Ella's upper-class Roxbury society. A friend got him a job as a shoeshine boy at the Roseland Ballroom, which rapidly became the center of his social life. With straightened hair and wearing a zoot suit, the hustler's uniform, he began to spend most of his free time there, dancing and learning the trades of the con man, the pimp, the dope pusher and the thief. Ella's last hopes for saving him from ruin disappeared when he jilted Laura, the "respectable" Roxbury girl he had been dating, for a white woman, Sophia.

When America entered World War II, Malcolm was sixteen, too young for the army, but by lying about his age, he was able to get a job on the railroad, the war having caused a shortage of Negro porters, cooks, and waiters. This job took him for the first time to New York City, and when he was fired from the railroad for wild behavior, he went to Harlem to live.

He took a job as a waiter at Small's Paradise, a famous Harlem club, where he became acquainted with the elite of Harlem's underworld. When he was fired from Small's, for soliciting an Army spy for a prostitute, he moved naturally into the sorts of jobs he had been learning from Small's customers — selling marijuana, stickups, numbers running, and bootlegging. After running into trouble with another hustler, and a narrow scrape with the police, Malcolm fled back to Boston. There he formed a burglary ring, with Sophia, her sister, and his friend Shorty. Again, he got into trouble: first, with a friend of Sophia's white husband; then, with the police. He was caught and sentenced to ten years in prison.

During his seven years in prison (1946-52), Malcolm underwent a great change. He was greatly influenced by a prisoner called Bimbi, a self-educated man who convinced Malcolm of the value of education. In the intervening years since leaving the eighth grade, Malcolm had forgotten how to read and write,

but with Bimbi's tutelage and encouragement, he began to read and study, even taking correspondence courses in English and Latin.

In 1948, Malcolm's brother Reginald visited the prison and told Malcolm that he had a way to get him out of prison. He would not elaborate upon his scheme, but he did tell Malcolm not to eat any more pork. Purely on faith, Malcolm followed Reginald's advice. He later saw this as an instance of Allah, the God of Islam, working his will.

Reginald's plan was to enlist Malcolm as a member of the Nation of Islam, popularly known as the "Black Muslims." This religion, founded by Elijah Muhammad in the 1930s, strongly urged the separation of the races and considered the white man as the devil incarnate—a tenet which Malcolm was, by this time, quite willing to believe. The teachings of Elijah Muhammad stimulated Malcolm's interest in history, particularly in the history of the black peoples of the world; he found after studying history that there was compelling evidence of the white man's evil nature. Thus Malcolm joined the Nation of Islam and adopted the name by which he was to become famous—Malcolm X.

In 1952, Malcolm was paroled and went to Detroit to live with his brother Wilfred, also a member of the Black Muslims. Malcolm took a job in an automobile factory and began finding out all he could about the Nation of Islam. He even went to Chicago to meet Elijah Muhammad and eventually quit his job to study personally under this man, whom he considered his "savior." Late in 1953, Malcolm returned to Boston to organize a Black Muslim temple there, and in 1954, he was sent to Philadelphia; as a reward for his speed and diligence in organizing the temple there, he was appointed minister of Temple Seven in Harlem.

In the years between 1953 and 1963, the Nation of Islam grew from a small number of storefront temples to a large, organized, vocal national movement dedicated to black separatism, and Malcolm became its best-known and most volatile spokesman.

During this time, he was minister of Temple Number Seven and was organizer of several other temples around the country. He became increasingly close to Elijah Muhammad, both as an adviser and a friend. Early in 1958, Malcolm was married to Betty X, a member of his congregation. During the next seven years they had four daughters, Attilah, Qubilah, Ilyasah, and Amiliah.

In 1959, the Black Muslims began to attract nationwide publicity. They were the subject of a television documentary, "The Hate That Hate Produced," which focused primarily on Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm, emphasizing the organization's separatist doctrines and official hatred of whites. This program, along with C. Eric Lincoln's book *Black Muslims in America* and a series of violent confrontations with the police, rapidly vaulted Malcolm into national prominence as a symbol of, and spokesman for, the "angry black man." Because he was a symbol of racial hatred, he had frequent notoriety in the press concerning the burgeoning integration movement, which he opposed. For white America, he became an object of hatred and fear, especially for those liberal whites who backed integration.

Malcolm's sudden notoriety had unexpected results; Elijah Muhammad, fearful of his growing influence, began to withdraw his support of Malcolm. At the same time, Malcolm began to hear rumors that Elijah Muhammad had been violating the moral codes of the Nation of Islam by committing adultery. The rift between the two men gradually grew wider and finally resulted in Malcolm's being silenced and his ultimate suspension from the organization.

The incident which led to the suspension (though it was more likely an excuse than an actual cause) was Malcolm's remark in November of 1963 that the assassination of President Kennedy was a case of "chickens coming home to roost." Although the suspension was initially to be for only ninety days, Malcolm suspected that it would become permanent. His suspicions were confirmed when a member of his temple confessed to him that he had been ordered to assassinate Malcolm by bombing his car. The assassination order, which could have been

given only by Elijah Muhammad himself, hastened Malcolm's "psychological divorce" from the Muslims. Soon his new-found feeling of independence, coupled with his awareness of his popularity with ghetto blacks, led him to found his own organization.

Despite its name, Muslim Mosque, Inc., Malcolm's organization was intended to be primarily a secular, politically-oriented activist group dedicated to carrying out the program of racial separation and community control which the Nation of Islam had put forth, but failed to act upon. Malcolm realized the necessity of including blacks of all faiths in his new organization, so he attempted to de-emphasize the religious bias. At the same time, however, he was being influenced more and more by the orthodox Islam faith of the Middle East, and early in 1964, he decided to make a pilgrimage to Mecca, the Holy City of Islam — a journey which every true Muslim must make once in his lifetime.

Malcolm's pilgrimage to Mecca was financed by Ella, who had also broken with the Nation of Islam, and who had been saving to make the pilgrimage herself. The trip was arranged with the cooperation and assistance of Muslim officials in America, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia; all obstacles in the complicated procedure of obtaining permission to enter the city were ignored because of the assistance of other Muslims, black and white. During the pilgrimage, Malcolm began to realize that the whiteness he had hated and fought in America was not so much a matter of color, as the Nation of Islam had taught, but a matter of attitude and behavior. Being white did not make a man evil; but being a white American, however, generally did imply certain patterns of behavior and certain attitudes about race. Thus Malcolm began to believe that the only way that America could avert racial disaster was to alter its social makeup and to accept the "Oneness of Man" under the "Oneness of God" — a truth which "Christian" white America had ignored.

This is not to say that Malcolm came to embrace the doctrine of integration; he did not. He still believed in the separation of races, mainly because of the natural inclination of peoples of similar color to seek one another out. But he did believe it

possible for people of different races to cooperate and coexist, if they would learn to consider one another as brothers under Allah.

After the pilgrimage, Malcolm once again changed his name. The first change had been the renunciation of his "slave name," Little; the new change was the acceptance of the ceremonial Muslim title, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, "the pilgrim Malcolm the Negro." He was made a guest of the state by Prince Faisal of Saudi Arabia, who granted him a personal audience and discussed with him the doctrinal differences between Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam and true Islam.

On his return journey, Malcolm visited several Middle Eastern and African countries and was received as an important visitor by both state officials and Afro-American expatriates in Nigeria and Ghana. This journey revealed to him the internal role of the black man and the possibilities of an international union of purpose among black people. It was this awakening that led to the idea of taking the matter of the black man's role in *America before the United Nations*—that is, he wanted to treat it as an international problem.

Malcolm was not surprised that his idea failed to gain wide support, nor that Afro-Americans did not rush to follow him into orthodox Islam as their religion. He felt that circumstances had permitted him to realize things they could not yet realize, especially during his pilgrimage to Mecca; therefore, they could not fully understand the significance of his new religion and his feelings about international black unity.

Malcolm made another trip to Africa and to the Middle East later in 1964, and was again received as a visiting dignitary by the heads of state of the various nations he visited. He returned and spent much time working with his Organization of Afro-American Unity, which he had founded after his first trip abroad. These last few months of his life were a time of intense pressure. He was under continual threat of assassination by the Black Muslims, and his assistants were continually harassed and assaulted. His family was threatened with eviction from their

home, which was owned by the Nation of Islam; and pressing financial needs of both his family and his fledgling organization kept him busy, speaking on college campuses and filming television programs. He also spent a great deal of time attempting to mend his relationship with more “moderate” black leaders.

Early in 1965, he travelled to France and England to make speaking engagements, but he was refused entry to France because he was an “undesirable.” The night of his return to New York (February 13), his home was firebombed. Malcolm and his family escaped injury, but half the house was destroyed. Malcolm accused the Black Muslims of this attempt on his life; the Muslims countered with the charge that Malcolm had bombed the house himself, for the sake of publicity. A few days later, Malcolm confided to his collaborator on the *Autobiography*, Alex Haley, that he was no longer certain that it was the Muslims who were attempting to take his life. He made no specific charges, but said that he thought the attempts might be related to “what happened to me in France”—implying some sort of threat against him by persons in positions of authority.

On Sunday, February 21, 1965, Malcolm X was assassinated. He was to speak at an Organization of Afro-American Unity organizational meeting at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem. As he began to speak, a fight broke out in the audience. During the ensuing confusion, three gunmen approached the stage and shot him down. He died instantly.

Three men, two of them Black Muslims, were arrested and convicted of the crime, but many of Malcolm’s adherents still feel that the assassination was planned and carried out by a larger group of conspirators, perhaps including agents of the U.S. government. Whoever killed Malcolm, however, did not succeed in destroying his influence. Through *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, published after his death, he has reached a much wider and more sympathetic audience than he ever had during his lifetime.

The volume may be read in many ways. As an autobiography, it tells the life story of an interesting and important man. As a sociological study, it provides fascinating insights into ghetto life and the ways which one man learned to survive in the ghetto. As a religious work—which is perhaps the way Malcolm intended the book to be read—it tells of his struggle to find his God. Yet it is as a political work that the book has had its strongest impact. Through the *Autobiography*, Malcolm has continued to exert great influence over the various black radical political movements since his death. His precise political position at the end of his life is unclear; however, he had been going through a period of transition during the year since his expulsion from the Nation of Islam and he had been reassessing his old beliefs. One of the major difficulties with this autobiography is the fact that it was written over a period of two years, during one of which he was still a Black Muslim minister; also, he died before the book could be put into final form. Therefore, his attitudes expressed in the book sometimes seem contradictory, and it is difficult to tell in exactly what direction he was moving at the end of his life. Perhaps he would most like to be remembered as he suggested to *Life* magazine reporter Gordon Parks a few days before his death: "It's a time for martyrs now. And if I'm to be one, it will be in the cause of brotherhood."

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Malcolm X (Malcolm Little, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz)

Author, narrator and principal character of the *Autobiography*.

Reverend Earl Little

Malcolm's father, a Baptist minister and an organizer for the militant Universal Negro Improvement Association.

Louise Little

Malcolm's mother; a proud woman who is finally broken by family misfortunes.

Elijah Muhammad (Elijah Poole, Elijah Karriem)

Founder and leader of the Nation of Islam; Malcolm's teacher and spiritual adviser, later his principal adversary.

Ella (Ella Mae Little Collins)

Malcolm's half-sister (his father's daughter); his guardian during adolescence, and a lifelong friend and supporter.

Reginald Little

Malcolm's younger brother and closest friend in the family. It was Reginald who first talked to Malcolm about the Nation of Islam.

Betty X (Betty Shabazz)

Malcolm's wife (married in 1958).

Shorty

Malcolm's "homeboy" and close friend in Boston. A would-be musician; later Malcolm's partner in a burglary ring.

Sammy

Malcolm's closest friend in Harlem; a pimp.

Laura

Malcolm's first love; daughter of a respectable Roxbury family. Jilted by Malcolm for Sophia, she later turned to drugs and prostitution.

Sophia

White woman in Boston who had a long-standing affair with Malcolm, although she was married to a white man. Later

Malcolm's partner (along with her sister and Shorty) in a burglary ring.

Cassius Clay (Muhammad Ali)

World heavyweight boxing champion; a Black Muslim and a close friend of Malcolm.

West Indian Archie

A Harlem numbers operator; once a friend of Malcolm, but he turned against him when he suspected that Malcolm had cheated him.

Bimbi

Fellow-convict of Malcolm at Charlestown Prison; taught Malcolm to respect and value education again.

Wallace D. Fard

He does not appear in the book, but he was a major influence upon Malcolm through Elijah Muhammad. The "Messenger of Allah," he first met Elijah Muhammad in Detroit in 1931; taught Elijah Muhammad the doctrines of the new religion and named him his successor. He disappeared in 1934.

Marcus Garvey

He does not appear in the book, but he too was a major influence upon Malcolm through his father, Earl Little, who was a follower of Garvey. A Jamaican who claimed pure African ancestry, Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association in 1917, one year after his arrival in America. Part of his program was the formation of a Negro state in Africa and the repatriation of New World Negroes to Africa. He founded a shipping company, the Black Star Line, for the return to Africa; later, he was convicted of fraud in connection with the operation of this business (which was financed by contributions from black

people), and was imprisoned in 1925, the year of Malcolm's birth. In 1927, Garvey was deported and his movement gradually dissolved.

Wilfred Little (Wilfred X)

Malcolm's older brother. A Black Muslim, Wilfred remained in the organization even though Malcolm was ousted.

Philbert Little (Philbert X)

Another older brother; also remained with the Muslims and repudiated Malcolm.

The Gohannas and Big Boy

A family with whom Malcolm was sent to live by the Welfare Department in 1937.

Earl

Malcolm's half-brother, his father's eldest son.

Mary

Malcolm's half-sister.

Hilda

Malcolm's older sister; she took charge of the younger children after their father was killed.

Yvonne

Malcolm's younger sister.

Wesley

Malcolm's younger brother.

Robert

Malcolm's youngest brother.

Attilah

Malcolm's eldest daughter, born in November, 1958; named after Attila the Hun.

Qubilah

Malcolm's second daughter, born Christmas Day, 1960; named after Qubilah Khan.

Ilyasah

Malcolm's third daughter, born in July, 1962; the name is an Arabic version of Elias.

Amiliah

Malcolm's fourth daughter, born in 1964.

Maynard Allen

State welfare agent who had charge of Malcolm during his stay in the detention home.

The Swerlins

Family in charge of the detention home, with whom Malcolm lived during his stay there (1937-41).

Duane and Lucille Lathrop

Negro servants of the Swerlins.