



A Global Model: The Mythicization and Mobilization of Malcolm X in the Malay World

KHAIRUDIN ALJUNIED

YAQVEEN[™]
INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC RESEARCH

Author Biography

Dr. Khairudin Aljunied (Ph.D. SOAS, London) is an Associate Professor at the National University of Singapore and Senior Fellow (previously Malaysia Chair of Islam in Southeast Asia) at the Alwaleed Centre for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown University. He is the author of a number of books; recent ones include *Colonialism Violence and Muslims in Southeast Asia: The Maria Hertogh Controversy and Its Aftermath* (Routledge, 2009); *Radicals: Resistance and Protest in Colonial Malaya* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2016), *Muslim Cosmopolitanism: Southeast Asian Islam in Comparative Perspective* (Edinburgh University Press), *Hamka and Islam: Cosmopolitan Reform in the Malay World* (Cornell University Press, 2018) and *Islam in Malaysia: An Entwined History* (Oxford University Press, 2019). His research covers topics such as religious cosmopolitanism, social movements, and intellectual history. He is currently writing a new book entitled *Shapers of Islam in Southeast Asia* which will be published by Oxford University Press (New York, 2021).

Disclaimer: *The views, opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in these papers and articles are strictly those of the authors. Furthermore, Yaqeen does not endorse any of the personal views of the authors on any platform. Our team is diverse on all fronts, allowing for constant, enriching dialogue that helps us produce high-quality research.*

Copyright © 2020. Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research

Abstract

This article explores the ways in which Malcolm's life and ideas have been mythicized and used as an inspiration for ideational, social, and political mobilization in contemporary Malaysia and Indonesia—two of the largest Muslim nations in the world today. I examine works of fiction, digital resources, and speeches of Malay-Muslim activists who engaged in the mythicization and mobilization of Malcolm's thought. Malcolm X's speeches have been translated from one language to another, absorbed, adapted, appropriated, and vernacularized among Malay-Indonesian Muslims, ushering in novel formulations of the notions of justice, freedom, and equality in a setting Malcolm was not very familiar with but had gained much intellectual stimulus from. It follows then that this paper seeks to address a yawning gap in the ever-growing studies on Malcolm X: how his ideas and life story were recast outside the Anglo-American world.

Introduction

Few African American Muslim figures have attracted as much scholarly attention outside the Euro-American academe as has Malcolm X. Courageous, sincere, brutally honest, and eloquent, his fame could be attributed to the fact that he was “the first real Black spokesperson who looked ferocious white racism in the eye, didn't blink, and lived long enough to tell America the truth about this glaring hypocrisy in a bold and defiant manner.”¹ But Malcolm X did not only place White racism on his rhetorical chopping board. He grew to become progressively concerned with injustices and exploitation of all sorts that affected most of humankind, the bottom billion that populated much of Africa, Asia, and the wider Muslim world. His ideas morphed from a racially-oriented position to one that leaned closer to the ideals of Islamic universalism just before his untimely demise.²

¹ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Beacon Press, 2001), 151.

² Dustin J. Byrd, “Malcolm X: From Political Eschatology to Religious Revolutionary,” in *Malcolm X: From Political Eschatology to Religious Revolutionary*, eds. Dustin J. Byrd and Seyed Javad Miri (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 126; Edward E. Curtis IV, *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 12.

This shift was born out of Malcolm X's travels outside the United States to as far as Southeast Asia.

Despite Malcolm X's attentiveness to the plight of oppressed people all over the world and the sway that he held in the minds of thinkers and laypersons globally, very little has been written about his influence outside the Euro-American world. He has been particularized as a quintessentially American activist who fused Islam, Black suffering, and human rights discourse into a potent political theology. This is not to say that such a localized focus on the legacy of Malcolm X is a step backward in our efforts to analyze his massive contributions. Far from it. Rather, what I wish to argue here is that Malcolm X had a far wider supra-local significance than has been previously assumed and how the ideas, experiences, and models outside the United States shaped his discourses must be placed in sharp relief now more than ever. As such, my purpose here is to add to the "growing cohort of interdisciplinary scholars whose work extends the project of recuperating Malcolm X's radical humanism and his global legacy, which collectively challenge the 'Americanization of Malcolm X.'"³

Indeed, Malcolm was and is still an exemplar whose life journey, personal reflections, and public pronouncements acquire a deep resonance and meaning among a broad spectrum of people located far in space and time from his own. Malcolm X's autobiography and ideas have been translated from one language to another, absorbed, adapted, appropriated, and vernacularized among Muslims outside the United States, ushering in novel formulations of the notions of justice, freedom, and equality in settings Malcolm was not very familiar with but from which he had gained much intellectual stimulus.

My focus here is on how Muslims in the Malay world projected different Malcolm Xs to serve different ends. In the first part of this essay, I look at the mythicization of Malcolm X in that his life story was novelized with an eye to demonstrating how a marginal figure in society eventually became a champion of the marginals. This is followed by the mobilization of Malcolm X whereby he was extolled by

³ Zareena Grewal, "1965 and the Global Intellectual Afterlife of Malcolm X," *American Studies* 54, no. 2 (2015): 11.

contemporary Muslims as a resource for youths, preachers, and political activists. In this, I examine the employment of the image of Malcolm X to promote certain religious, social, and political agendas. The mythicization and mobilization of Malcolm X's life and ideas reveal the wide and ever-expanding uses of Malcolm X in the contemporary Muslim world.

Mythicization

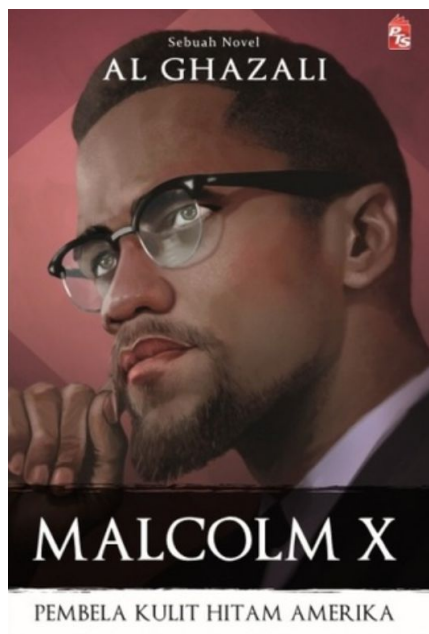
In life and in death, Malcolm X is a perpetual source of myth, sometimes loved and other times condemned. In the eyes of his detractors, he was a racist, a violent preacher, and a militant, among many negative epithets. Among those who admired his courage in speaking truth to power, he is glorified as an ideologue for the weak, for human dignity, for revolutionary change, and for the excluded. The mythicization of Malcolm X has made him greater than the sum of the many dimensions and shifts in his life. For that same reason, his subjectivities are all too often drowned by a melange of hero-worshipping narratives and iconoclastic critiques, thus making him an either-or: a prized idealist or a demonic demagogue.⁴

Here, I wish to provide a critical analysis of an ongoing attempt at mythicizing Malcolm X as an icon to be admired and followed. Such a mythicization ought to be problematized as it will unravel the ways in which and the reasons why selected aspects of Malcolm X's legacy are magnified, at times at the expense of other facets of his life. I place under scrutiny a recent and relatively popular novel written by Al Ghazali Sulaiman. Published in Malaysia, the book has been reprinted twice since its release in 2017. Al Ghazali has written twenty historical novels that are all geared toward making his Malay-speaking readers aware of the lives of prominent historical figures as useful lessons for them to confront a complex future. His novels are therefore not sheer pulp fiction but fictionalized

⁴ Maria Josefina Saldana-Portillo, "Consuming Malcolm X: Prophecy and Performative Masculinity," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 30, no. 2 (1997), 307. The latest iconoclastic take on Malcolm X is by Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York: Viking, 2011). A sharp yet informed critique of Manning's imbalanced and highly speculative approach to Malcolm X's biography is found in bell hooks, *Writing beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 71–80.

versions of actual historical personas narrated in ways that serve a particular function: to reform society.

The historical novel that has gained Al Ghazali most attention recently is entitled *Malcolm X: Pembela Kulit Hitam Amerika* (Malcolm X: Defender of the Blacks in America). The title is in itself suggestive of the author's narrative framework. The novel aims at uncovering the making of a heroic personality whose landmark achievement was to speak on behalf of a marginalized group of people in American history. The word “*hitam* (Black)” placed in the subtitle sets the tone for a story that shows how a valiant colored man struggled in the face of White domination. This “Black versus White” binary that Al Ghazali establishes is among the many myths about Malcolm X that have been circulating especially among writers who would like to position him as a victim of a White-dominated society and a spokesperson for the black community.⁵ The first nine chapters of the novel (almost a third of the entire book) heighten this point as Al Ghazali tracks how Malcolm X suffered under continuous threats by militant White groups which led to his father's death and his family falling apart.



⁵ See Regina Jennings, *Malcolm X and the Poetics of Haki Madhubuti* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2006), 5–28.

Nor is this all. Although the overall structure of the novel mirrors that of Malcolm X's autobiography, the novel also departs from it in a few significant ways. First, like most texts of this genre that are tailored toward making the readers sympathetic to or intimate with the main historical actor, it "summons powerful emotions, it disconcerts and puzzles. It inspires distrust of conventional pieties and exacts a frequently painful confrontation with one's thoughts and intentions."⁶ Al Ghazali achieves this by interlacing the descriptions of actual figures and events with dialogues between those figures. Some of these dialogues and descriptions are highly emotive. For example, while grieving at his father's funeral, the five-year-old Malcolm X said to his elder brother Wilfred, "I am scared." Wilfred replied confidently (which is the author's way of showing Black confidence in the face of tragedy), "There is nothing to be afraid of. Our father was a human being. His time has come." Malcolm then looked his brother in the eyes and replied, "I am afraid that our home will be attacked and burnt down again. Where would we live if our home has become ashes?" Al Ghazali then closes this emotional chapter with a more tragic note which further dramatizes Malcolm's grim childhood which formed his eventual character. "Malcolm was just five years old and too young to accept the reality of a painful life. Earl's demise is but a small setback. They [Malcolm's family] least expect a bigger problem that lurks on the horizon."⁷

Secondly, Al Ghazali's historical novel downplays many of Malcolm X's personal failings in the author's venture to provide a linear account of Malcolm's ostensible role as a Black rights activist. One example is Malcolm X's relationship with an African American woman. An entire chapter in the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* is dedicated to discussing Laura and how much she was affected by Malcolm X leaving her to begin a crime-ridden relationship with a White woman named Sophia. Malcolm X openly acknowledged that "[o]ne of the shames I have carried for years is that I blame myself for all of this. To have treated her [Laura] as I did for a White woman made the blow doubly heavy. The only excuse I can offer is

⁶ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), 5.

⁷ Al Ghazali, *Malcolm X: Pembela Kulit Hitam Amerika* (Selangor: PTS Publications, 2017), 33.

that like so many of my Black brothers today, I was just deaf, dumb, and blind.”⁸ The reality is, of course, more complex than Malcolm X had admitted. Still, Al Ghazali chose to remove this significant part of Malcolm’s life story which showed that he was not merely a victim of circumstances. Malcolm was also a perpetrator of injustice toward his own people at one stage in his life, a fact that he openly disclosed. Viewed from this perspective, if a historical novelist is, as Alessandro Manzoni argues, one who does more than regurgitate “the bare bones of history, but something richer, more complete. In a way you want him to put the flesh back on the skeleton that is history,”⁹ then Al Ghazali has removed more flesh in what could have been a more nuanced depiction, albeit fictional, of Malcolm X. Al Ghazali may have done so to ensure that Malcolm X is looked up to as a point of reference for Muslims.

Above all, Al Ghazali’s novel embellishes his subject’s virtues as a martyr of a pristine form of Islam. This embellishment is problematic as it insulates Malcolm X from an in-depth examination of his personality and deeds in order to arrive at a more humanized portrayal of him. Even so, mythicization is not always a negative thing: it can function as a powerful tool for community cohesion, as an instrument of identity formation, and also as a source of inspiration for posterity. Al Ghazali achieves this in two ways. The first was to show how Malcolm X transformed fully from being a Black nationalist into a Muslim who accepted that all human beings are equal. In Chapter 35 with the suggestive title “El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz,” Al Ghazali relates Malcolm X’s radical transformation upon his return to New York City after completing the *hajj*. Malcolm X told the press how he was wrong to assume that all White people were evil and that he had since accepted that Whites too could join hands with colored people to undo injustices. The chapter ends hyperbolically. While driving his Oldsmobile, Malcolm X encountered a White couple in their car at a traffic junction. The man in the car recognized Malcolm X and called out his name. He then asked: “Are you willing to shake hands with a White man?” Malcolm X responded: “I have no issues with shaking hands with a

⁸ Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine, 1964), 69–70.

⁹ Alessandro Manzoni, *On the Historical Novel*, trans. Sandra Bermann (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 67–68.

human being.” He then added: “Are you willing to do the same?”¹⁰ Malcolm’s rejoinder as narrated by Al Ghazali shows how he had moved on from his racist past.

In sum, Al-Ghazali’s mythicization of Malcolm X blurs the division between reality and fiction. Indeed, the idea that reality and fiction are two discrete “realms” is quite misleading, for it blinds one to the more subtle displacements and carry-over effects between the two as well as to the specific and mutable nature of the contradictions or modes of alienation that may arise between and within them.¹¹ Al Ghazali challenges the established story of Malcolm X’s life to introduce his own version of the various events, actors, and other contexts that gave rise to a globally renowned African American activist. By de-emphasizing Malcolm’s frailties and bringing attention to his radical transformation into a man “whose name would always be remembered as long as human rights and equality are upheld,” Al Ghazali’s novel adds to the internationalization and vernacularization of the myth-making enterprise surrounding the character of Malcolm X.¹² Malcolm X’s fictionalized life, or his mythicized biography, becomes part of the shared legacy of Muslims in the Malay world in the author’s effort to portray him as a global model to be followed.

Mobilization

There has been a resurgence of interest in Malcolm X in the United States today as it copes with the marginalization and mistreatment of minorities, particularly African Americans. The image of Malcolm X is now refashioned, resurrected, and mobilized to “represent the internalized expression of their [African American] anger and frustration. The promotion of Malcolm X becomes essentially a kind of voodoo doll—something to shake at White people and say, “I’m not happy here. I’m not satisfied yet.””¹³ Muslims in Malaysia and Indonesia have not experienced

¹⁰ Al Ghazali, *Malcolm X*, 216.

¹¹ Dominick LaCapra, *History, Politics, and the Novel* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 206.

¹² Al Ghazali, *Malcolm X*, 219.

¹³ Darren W. Davis and Christian Davenport, “The Political and Social Relevancy of Malcolm X: The Stability of African American Political Attitudes,” *Journal of Politics* 59, no. 2 (1997): 561.

the same form of challenges as those minorities in the USA. Even so, Malcolm X is still an imperative tool of mobilization and an effective instrument in highlighting stark prejudices. Malcolm X is relevant for majority Muslims in the Malay world because his ideas address the concerns of three main groups: Muslim youth, preachers, and political activists. I will examine here how these three groups have mobilized Malcolm X for their respective causes and how they have used his ideas to effect positive changes in their societies. The mobilization of Malcolm X is, in other words, the use of Malcolm's ideas for constructive transformations. Due to limitations of space, I will discuss only a few notable examples from each of the three groups.

To Muslim youth in the Malay world, Malcolm X is the epitome of courage, idealism, and self-reliance. These are traits that should be embodied by various programs. An illustrative case in point is the Angkatan Belia Islam Semalaysia (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia), more commonly known as ABIM. This 40,000-strong globally recognized movement holds Malcolm X high as an iconic figure in modern Islamic history who effected change in the lives of young Muslims. Malcolm X is therefore couched as not just an African American Muslim but, as Ahmad Azam (one of the former Presidents of ABIM) described, "one who waged a battle against all forms of oppression."¹⁴ Malcolm X's speeches, ideas, and life story are often quoted, publicized, discussed, and developed by ABIM into practical activities for the youth in the Malay World.

From 11-17 April 1996, ABIM organized a public screening of a documentary on Malcolm X at the Putra World Trade Centre, Kuala Lumpur in conjunction with the visit of Imam Warithudeen Muhammad, the son of Elijah Muhammad who transformed the Nation of Islam into a mainstream Sunni-oriented movement. This was one of the many programs that ABIM had organized in memory of Malcolm X's activism to inspire the youth.¹⁵ More recently, in April 2016, the Malaysia Youth Council, an umbrella body of all youth organizations in the country held a

¹⁴ "Mengenang El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X)," *Madinah Al-Nur* (blog), February 21, 2009, <https://ahmadazam.blogspot.com/2009/02/mengenang-el-hajj-malik-el-shabazz.html>.

¹⁵ "Imam Warithudeen Muhammad," *Madinah Al-Nur* (blog), September 19, 2008, <https://ahmadazam.blogspot.com/2008/09/imam-warithudeen-muhammad.html>.

public forum to critically discuss Malcolm X's speeches, notably, *Malcolm X Speaks to Young People*. One speaker at the event, Jufitri Joha, was ABIM's vice president. The main aim of the event was to make Malcolm X known to the young who may have not been aware of his importance. The speakers at the forum all stressed Malcolm's remarkable resilience in the face of life's challenges. Malcolm X is projected as a model for youth to be more involved in social and other grassroots causes.¹⁶

Malcolm X's ideas and life story are mobilized by youth to encourage them to be prime movers of society and catalysts of change; among Muslim preachers in the Malay world, he is the standard for any Muslim who engages in the work of spreading the message of Islam to the world. A quick search on Google with the keywords "Malcolm X"+"dakwah" yields hundreds of websites written in the Malay-Indonesian language that extol Malcolm X's role in Islamic missionary work (*da'wah* or *dakwah* [in Malay]). Many of these articles explain how he brought thousands into the fold of Islam and captured the world's attention toward tackling the plight of African Americans. Indonesia's celebrated and award-winning journalist and poet, Goenawan Mohamed, for example, described Malcolm X's Muslim missionary work as one that moved beyond addressing the shackles of racism to acknowledging the universal conception of justice as enjoined by Islam. The spirit of *dakwah* of Malcolm X, according to Goenawan, is relevant for Indonesians. "Still we know that Malcolm lives on. The one who transcended hatred or even death."¹⁷

For Ustaz Abdul Somad, one of Indonesia's most popular preachers today, Malcolm X was a modern manifestation of a known model Muslim, Bilal bin Raba, who was one of Prophet's Muhammad's closest companions from an African background. Like Bilal, Malcolm X preached Islam to non-Muslims instead of Muslims only. Reflecting on this point, Abdul Somad criticizes Muslim clerics for preaching to the converted in the Malay World, who were making Muslims more Islamic instead of bringing the message of Islam to the non-Muslim

¹⁶ "Kupasan Buku: Malcolm X Talks to Young People," Majlis Belia Malaysia, April 19, 2016, <http://belia.org.my/wp/2016/04/19/kupasan-buku-malcolm-x-talks-to-young-people/>.

¹⁷ Goenawan Mohamad, *Catatan Pinggir*, vol. 10 (Jakarta: Graffiti Pers, 2012), 70.

population as Malcolm X did. Abdul Samad stressed that Malcolm X's *dakwah* catered to all human beings, whom Malcolm X saw as his brethren.¹⁸

Finally, I wish to highlight here the mobilization of Malcolm X by political activists. A cursory survey of the extant literature shows that no incumbent politician in the Malay World has ever mentioned Malcolm X in their speeches and writings and the reasons for this are not hard to guess. Malcolm's ideas would lay bare many of the jaundiced policies that are in place, especially in the realm of minority marginalization. For the same reason, Malcolm X's speeches and life story have found their appeal mainly among oppositional forces in mainstream politics as a means by which transformations could be agitated.

One prominent example is the use of Malcolm X by members of the former opposition party (now incumbent), Pakatan Rakyat (PR) in Malaysia. During his speech on 4th October 2014 in conjunction with the Hari Raya Haji celebrations (celebrations in honor of the month of *haji*), Azmin Ali, the Chief Minister of the opposition-held state of Selangor called attention to the spirit of Malcolm X. He urged the public to support democracy, human rights, and tolerance in a multi-ethnic society, which were issues that Malcolm X stood for toward the end of his life.¹⁹ A few months later, in a lengthy interview, the youth leader of the PR, Nik Nazmi, mentioned how Malcolm X had influenced his views on racial equality in Malaysia and the need for a new form of that politics would redress social and economic injustices.²⁰ In the same month, the leader of PR (now Prime Minister-in-waiting) Anwar Ibrahim, tweeted Malcolm X's famous quote on the misinformation which newspapers were capable of purveying, indirectly criticizing the ruling government of manipulating the media to entrench their power and consolidate their hegemony in Malaysia.²¹ For the opposition politicians in the

¹⁸ "MALCOLM X - Ustadz Abdul Somad, Lc. MA," March 18, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8ffcNb4J68>.

¹⁹ "Azmin Invokes Malcolm X in Sharp Hari Raya Message," *Malay Mail*, October 4, 2014, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2014/10/04/azmin-invokes-malcolm-x-in-sharp-hari-raya-haji-message/757945>.

²⁰ Rita Jong, "The Lessons that Malcolm X Taught Me," *Focus Malaysia*, December 18, 2014, 10–11.

²¹ Anwar Ibrahim (@anwaribrahim), "Good quote fr Malcolm X," Twitter, December 6, 2014, 5:27 p.m., <https://twitter.com/anwaribrahim/status/541373306507493376>.

Malay world, Malcolm X was a guiding light and also a weapon against their nemeses.



In sum, like mythicization, the mobilization of Malcolm X is inevitably a selective and condensed view of his multifaceted life. Malcolm X's noteworthy traits and accomplishments are used for the purposes of mobilization while his imperfections are redacted and refracted in ways that transform the negative into useful lessons for personal and social reconstruction.

Conclusion

In an incisive take on the legacy of Malcolm X, Emin Poljarevic highlights the epistemic bias within contemporary scholarly analyses that have done much to “sidestep an Islamic dimension of an iconic civil rights leader.”²² Poljarevic goes further to state that Malcolm X's “fearless commitment to justice and equality are still great moral resources for contemporary minority populations in the USA and,

²² Emin Poljarevic, “Malik al-Shabazz's Practice of Self-Liberation,” in *Malcolm X: From Political Eschatology to Religious Revolutionary*, eds. Dustin J. Byrd and Seyed Javad Miri (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 227–228.

potentially, in Europe as well.”²³ The pages that follow further Poljarevic’s point by arguing that Malcolm X was and is still a great source of inspiration, not only for minorities but also for majorities seeking to realize Malcolm X’s dream of a just and equitable society.

Malcolm X demystified the idea that the struggle of African Americans in America was a struggle of minorities against the dominant White population. As he put it sharply, “It’s impossible for you and me to know where we stand until we look around in this entire earth.”²⁴ His travels reshaped his approaches to the struggles for social justice and, in so doing, he became an icon, a model, whose words and deeds were emulated by his Malay counterparts. It remains to be seen what other forms of appropriation of Malcolm X will appear in the near future. For now, that Malcolm X’s influence has spread into the far reaches of the Malay world demonstrates the universality of his message and the unique quality of his life story for the betterment of humanity.

²³ Poljarevic, “Malik al-Shabazz’s Practice of Self-Liberation,” 245–246.

²⁴ Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 163.