

Encountering Malcolm X

Vayu Naidu

I never intended to write this facing the Himalaya's Trishul (23,359 ft.) and Nanda Devi (25,646 ft.). Location: Mayavati – an encounter with the infinity of the spirit. These mountains are mega scale, and impactful to the eye of what can be achieved in our planet's lifetime.

After I first heard his name some 55 years ago, Malcolm X shifted my zone of a constructed world and a whole generation's consciousness of what it meant to be towering, human and daring to be free at any cost.

1969. The District of Columbia had for the first time appointed a black principal of a state-funded school in Washington D.C. I was 12, and my parents' government posting from India to the US had brought me to D.C. India's colonial legacy and an education in English had given me the English language. When I was admitted to Woodrow Wilson Senior High I was unaware of American social history.

On that first September morning of the Fall semester, my class tutor and Head of English, was a Miss Jackson. She had a way of taking in the entire class in one sweep of her eyes.

She opened the lemon-Pledged books cupboard beside the paint cracked cranky radiators. With her back to the class and us seated in rows of single, state-provision school desks etched with hearts and expletives, she was crouching, gathering books from the cupboard shelves. Then, standing up – she turned around. I was admiring her smart black-rimmed spectacles, new fall dress suit and straightened hair. She went down the first three rows of desks and triumphantly placed the books, back cover up. Our class of 30 was a mix of Spanish speakers, Black and White Americans, one English and one Indian student. It was co-educational, compelling and chaotic.

I was staring at the book on my desk. It was the first day in school and I was new to everything, except the news of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr, and the successful Apollo 11 landing on the moon. The Seniors were putting on *Hair*, the musical, in the auditorium, and the posters were swishing in my mind with psychedelic streams of hair.

'Wait till I'm done!' With speed on her heels, Miss Jackson was at the front of the class. She held the book up, back to front. There were nervous laughs, and chatter. She smiled wide and did the reveal, and we followed obediently.

The big red X across the black and white photograph of a bespectacled black man staring straight back at me gave me a wave of terror, of not knowing why this autobiography was so significant. I had just about managed to be awakened to life through literature by struggling through and, strangely for that age, enjoying *Of Human Bondage* by W. Somerset Maugham.

Miss Jackson spoke with an educator's passion. 'Black people get murdered, assassinated, and their stories go missing. Here's a story many of us live, and don't dare to find out how to speak.' Our eyes were on her and she read us. 'You're asking, why English? Read the writing, know the man, find America.'

I had never heard so much passion in a classroom before and flicked to a page headed SAVED and read the 'voice' of Malcolm X, describing a scene in Charlestown Prison where a Harvard seminary student teaching the Bible to black and white inmates was talking about the apostle Paul:

What color was Paul? [...] He had to be black ... because he was a Hebrew ... and the original Hebrews were black ... weren't they? [...] What color was Jesus ... he was Hebrew, too, wasn't he?

Both the Negro and the white convicts had sat bolt upright ... I could feel the nodding.

It had a seismic effect. In India I had been taught by jolly Irish nuns and all the images of Jesus, Mary, the apostles were Caucasian. Malcolm X's voice shot through my adolescent mind. It was a turning point about learning not to accept hearsay. It was a mind shift to return to the roots of anything, and enquire, and see how dangerous appropriation is.

The school had been picked to be a flagbearer of change. Its first black principal, Vincent Reed, brought that change to reality. Strategy and mobilising led young minds through a radical shift in institutional education. US immersion in the Vietnam war was well underway and the draft was statutory. The principal had moved in a staff of bright old and young black American educators in History, Politics, Art, English, Math, Sports – all my subjects. I began to see a US that *Life* or *Time* or *The Washington Post* would never tell adolescents like me about: race, culture, music, politics, teenage pregnancies and that distant war coming closer into

the kitchen. It was as History students of Edna Burke Jackson that we entered the psyche of what made America and learned the different shades of equality.

Reading and living the change Malcolm X had brought about after his murder is the encounter that has stayed, and shaped my thinking of the personal as political, in the arts, and in storytelling as means to archive migration and voices of the diaspora in Britain.

As Gary Younge says in his new introduction to the book: *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* represents the attitude not just of a man but of an era [...] Malcolm X sought to seize the moment to broaden both the understanding and the appeal of America's black struggles by locating them in the context of human rights and internationalism.' As Malcolm X asked, 'How is the black man going to get "civil rights" before first he wins his human rights?'

Malcolm Little's life – from Lansing, Michigan to Harlem and Mecca, and becoming the Malcolm X of history – is of a geological scale. Not unlike that of the Trishul and Nanda Devi. A violent eruption of the earth threw these mountains up and they have compelled humans to rise to the summit. Waves of racial and cultural encounters are the infinite spirit's grasp for freedom, not escape. That spirit and the freedom to think that Malcolm X brought into my life through his story are indelible.

The impact of standing and looking at the Himalayas is about encountering awe as well as participation. A connectedness of the spirit that comes in fiercer kinds of beings.

Vayu Naidu's storytelling – written and oral – spans diaspora, urban, epic, folk and tribal stories inspired by multiple literary and performance traditions. Her first novel, *Sita's Ascent*, was nominated for the Commonwealth Book Award. Her latest novel, *The Living Legend: Ramayana Tales Near and Far*, was published by Ebury in 2024. Naidu has written for British Theatre, BBC Radio Drama, and tours internationally as a Performance Storyteller. She is a Royal Literary Fund Bridge Fellow, and a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society. Naidu is Professor of Practice at The School of Arts, SOAS.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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