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THE BILALLIANS OF THE UNITED STATES

Malcolm X's hand flew to his chest as the first of the sixteen shotgun pellets or revolver slugs hit him. Then the other hand flew up. The middle finger of the left hand was bullet-shattered, and blood gushed from his goatee. He clutched his chest. His big body suddenly fell back stiffly, knocking over two chairs; his head struck the stage floor with a thud.¹

It happened on February 21, 1965 when Malcolm X, also known as El-Hajj Malik El-Shahbazz, was mysteriously slain in a gathering in Harlem, New York. That was a mourning day not only for all the Afro-Americans but for all the Muslims in the world. It was indeed a black day for the Black Muslims, whose movement he had nurtured with his own blood. These 'children of ex-slaves' had found a bold and dynamic seer in the person of Malcolm X, who was intent upon returning them the pride and the identity which they looked for so earnestly for countless generations. With the tragic assassination of Malcolm X, the Black Muslims' Movement suffered a severe setback and its whole image was destructively shattered among all kinds of the Americans. The leadership of its founder, Elijah Muhammad, suffered a colossal loss and the whole movement went into a limbo, until in mid-seventies, when new efforts to reinvigorate were initiated. Wallace D. Muhammad, the son and spiritual heir-apparent of late Elijah Muhammad has been honestly trying to ameliorate the entire set-up and has changed the name of the movement from 'the Black Muslims' to 'the Bilallians'.

The movement of the Black Muslims, presently known as the Bilallians, has been one of the leading exponents of the Black Nationalism, deriving its origin from Eastern spiritual traditions like from Islam, Arabia and Africa. The followers of the movement concurrently making 'the Nation of Islam' have been involved in a very historic effort to achieve a Blacks' Renaissance in a very alien environment, where a worst form of colonialism existed in form of slavery. The

persistence of racism had rendered the millions of Afro-Americans into quite a depraved and depressed community. No wonder that the Blacks for such a long period of their history lived as 'the most backward society in the most developed society' of the World. In other words the movement of the Bilallians is one of those nationalistic undercurrents in the American society which worked triumphantly towards the evolution of a "New Negro".

The Nation of Islam started its activities in mid-1930s, with the appearance of a Master Fard, a North-African Muslim then living in Detroit, Michigan. He prepared Elijah Muhammad, then known as Elijah Poole, a Black from Georgia, as his spiritual successor in the Western Hemisphere. After the mysterious disappearance of Master Fard in those early years of Great Depression, Elijah became the de facto and unchallenged leader of the movement until his death in mid-seventies. All the organizational and spiritual precepts stemmed from him while all through these years he was based in his Temple No. 2 in Chicago and guided the destiny of his followers across the nation.²

With the expulsion of Malcolm X in 1963 from the movement who criticised the basic flaws inherent in the practices and the policies of the leadership of the Nation, it enjoyed wide support among the middle class Afro-Americans. However, the dilemma of the Bilallians is very much a dilemma of the Black Americans. To understand the history of this movement we need to have at least an overview of the sufferings a Black man has gone through in the United States; only then will we be able to appreciate the extent of pathos and agony shared by hitherto unknown 'Third World' of our times.

The first Africans landed in Virginia in 1619 and for the next many years little is known about them and their other counterparts. But by 1700, when the Africans began flooding into English America, slavery had become an established institution: "Englishmen in America had created a new legal status which ran counter to English law".³ The racial, linguistic, religious and cultural differences had resulted into a very bleak and sub-standard life-style for the millions of Blacks. The slaves enjoyed no rights, in fact they were treated more or less like other commercial commodities. Except for a few Quakers of Pennsylvania, all the colonies were slave owning societies.⁴ The runaway slaves were treated very harshly and due to the colour of their skin could not get away at all. Contemporary visitors of America at that time, coming from different European countries wrote eye witness accounts of inhuman treatment

meted out to such runaways, particularly the ones from South.⁵

Even the conversion to Christianity on the part of many of these slaves could not win them any recognition on an equal footing with the white settlers. The Revolutionary America, despite its high sounding emphasis on equality, liberty and individual rights, denied the basic recognition to the problems of the slaves. Interestingly many of the Founding Fathers like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson themselves were slaveowners. The Enlightenment in America did not bring any change in the status quo of the slaves.⁶ During the early 19th century when a 'Modern America' was being created out of an agrarian past and the American expansion was taking place at the expense of Native Americans (Red Indians), the millions of Blacks had compromised with their fait accompli.

However, during 1830s the anti-slavery feelings generated an abolitionist movement from the Northern states, and the humanitarians like William Lloyd Garrison, Grimke Sisters and Henry David Thoreau raised their radical voices in favour of the emancipation of their dark-skinned fellow countrymen.⁷ These whites were joined by a few Black abolitionists, who somehow, by then had managed to win their freedom.⁸ The American Civil War and the emancipation of the slaves in its wake could not wipe out the racial prejudices and practices like segregation from the American society. And the Blacks' dilemma continued to persist.

By late 19th century, one finds an amazing amount of mobilization among the Blacks towards the urban centres. This migration generated a tremendous change in the attitudes and life-styles of the Blacks in America. The ghetto life inside the big towns like Boston, New York, Detroit, Gary and Chicago became the mainstream for leadership among the Blacks.

Booker T. Washington (1858-1915), a very impressive leader of the Afro-Americans advised his people to attain the industrial education, if they wanted to come out of the age-long depression. Born a slave in Virginia, he achieved distinction as an educator, a lecturer, and the founder of the Tuskegee Institute. His message seems to be very similar to that of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, the Muslim leader of that period of British India. Washington in his later years was very influential. After Frederick Douglass, he had been the most renowned leader of his people in those fateful years.⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963), another great writer, statesman and thinker of his generation basically differed with the conciliatory policies of Washington and wanted to prepare his people more on political grounds. Through his influential magazine, *The Crisis*, he reached the young Blacks everywhere. In his *The Souls of the Black*

Folks,¹⁰ a collection of essays, he explored the spirit, the culture and the aspirations of Negroes. He was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Later on he renounced his American citizenship and settled in Ghana. He died just one day before the historic 'March on Washington'.

Marcus Garvey, another bold activist of the early part of the 20th century led his movement from Harlem, New York, like Du Bois, and was very popular among the Blacks who looked at Africa as a Diaspora.

Harlem in New York in these early years of 20th century was not only a political centre of the Blacks in North America but also their spiritual, intellectual and cultural fountainhead. It truthfully represented the *Jazz Age*, which has become a myth in the writings of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Crowley and so many other white writers belonging to the 'Nervous Generation' of 1920s. But Harlem Renaissance in those years was specifically a resurgence of the Afro-Americans, which tried to restore some pride and confidence among the coloured folks. Harlem has been rightly called 'the home of Negroes' Zionism'.¹¹ Leroi Jones wrote about Harlem: "In a very real sense, Harlem is the Capital of Black America. And America has been always divided into black and white, and the substance of the division is social, economic and cultural. But even the name *Harlem*, now, means simply Negroes (though some other people live there too). The identification is international as well...¹² It was quite a different world where all sorts of people lived. Osofsky described the pluralistic form of the community in that part of New York, which is still very much true in the present times :

The Reverend Dr. Adam Clayton Power Sr., of Abyssinian Baptist Church lived in a cold water flat 'with prostitutes living over me and all around me'. He preached what he called 'gospel bombardment' to the pimps, prostitutes, keepers of dices and gambling dens, who sometimes attended his prayer meetings. They seemed to shout the loudest for the Lord's forgiveness. Others never came to church.¹³

However, the same Harlem was destined to become the future centre of all the cultural, intellectual and political activities of the Afro-Americans. Like 1920s, Harlem was in the focus of the subsequent movements which helped transform America in 1950s and 1960s. The Black leaders of these fateful years like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X heavily depended upon their Harlemites supporters. The contribution of Harlem in the history of the Blacks has been very vital and provided optimism for other Afro-Americans living in the urban ghettos in cities like Detroit, Boston, Chicago, Montgomery, Atlanta and

Los Angeles.

The movement of the Black Muslims started in the vital years of 1930s when the Great Depression had paralyzed the American economy. The Blacks in American cities working as the labourers were the most affected ones. The labour unrest was quite evident everywhere and the literature created during that period carried the saga of all the tensions which rural¹⁴ and urban¹⁵ proletariat classes were going through. The city of Detroit in Michigan, centre of the American automobiles' industries with a sizeable number of the Blacks in its population, presented the worst example in the history of the unemployment.

The sufferings of the Blacks were numerous and were not just economic only. The oppression in a racist society where violent organizations like Ku Klux Klan burnt the crosses and carried on violent attacks on the person or property of the Afro-Americans, was multiplying the frustrations of the coloured minority. Christianity had already failed to provide an equitable place for the Blacks which could be at par with the White majority. The 'Back to Africa' movement led by Marcus Carvey was strengthening the 'Africanism' or 'Easternism' of the Blacks. It was out of complete desperation that the Blacks initiated their quest for identity and tried to determine their roots.

The Blacks coming from northern cities, nurtured in the contemporary intellectual tradition were infused with a new competitive sense of pride. They tried to ameliorate the pitiable state of their kins. In the early 1930s, the Nation of Islam was founded by Master Wallace Fard Muhammad, an Arabian in Detroit during those years : "His organization first concentrated on Detroit Negroes and gained an estimated membership of perhaps 8,000 during the critical years of the depression. Late in 1933 he disappeared and Elijah Muhammad became the leader of the movement. Prophet Fard is acknowledged by Muhammad and his followers as the Mahdi."¹⁶ Master Fard used various names : Walli Farrad, Professor Ford, Farrad Muhammad, F. Muhammad Ali and even God, Allah. He was pedlar in Detroit in those years :

He came to our house selling raincoats, and then afterwards silks. In this way, he could get into the people's houses, for every woman was eager to see the nice things the peddlers had for sale. He told us that the silks he carried were the same kind that our people used in their home country and that he had come from there. So we all asked him to tell us about our own country....¹⁷

After the mysterious disappearance of Master Fard, Elijah Muhammad became the leader of Nation of Islam. He was born on

October 10, 1897, as a seventh child in a family of twelve on a tenant farm in Sandersville, Georgia. His real name was Elijah Poole. His father Reverend Poole was a Baptist minister there. While staying in Atlanta, Georgia, Elijah married Clara Evans at the age of 22 on March 7, 1919. Due to discrimination in the South, he moved with his wife and two children to Detroit in quite a despair. In Detroit, he worked in the Cheverlet factory until 1929, and was then on relief until 1931. He worked in Chicago for a brief period of time on some odd job. On his return to Detroit, he became the assistant of Master Fard and then the eventual and de facto leader of the Nation of Islam. He lived in Washington D. C. between 1935 and 1941 and was in prison from 1942 to 1946. Later on he lived all through his life in Chicago until his death in mid-seventies.

From 1934 to 1942 he organized his movement in other cities like Chicago, Milwaukee and Washington D. C. In 1942, Elijah Muhammad was indicted and imprisoned on the charge of violating Selective Services Act and the number of his followers dwindled for the time being. He had established his Muhammad's Temple No. 2 in Chicago in 1934 and since then this Midwestern City has been centre of all sorts of activities of the Nation. The temple in Chicago, now known as a mosque, along with the University of Islam has been operating as the headquarters for the Nation.

Elijah Muhammad propounded that 'Allah in the person of Master Fard Muhammad' confronted him in 1930 and for the following three years explained to him the history and significance of the 'Black Nation'.¹⁸ He taught Muhammad his beliefs concerning the Caucasian race, the religions of Islam and Christianity, as well as the 'truth' about the beginning of creation, the impending destruction of the Caucasian race and its civilization, and the final overthrow of white rule over the black peoples.¹⁹ After his supposed change over, Elijah prophesied that black, brown, yellow and red races would emerge as the sole rulers of the world under Allah's righteous guidance.

The Nation of Islam, known as the Black Muslims until mid 1970s and now known as the Bilallians "is distinguished from the Black Nation in that it is a chosen people within the Black Nation, elected by Allah as His special instrument for the entire redemption of the Black Nation. In theory the Nation of Islam consists of the Negro population of the United States; but in practice and for the time being, it is confined to the followers of Elijah Muhammad."²⁰

So in the basic evolution of the Nation of Islam, one finds Black

Nationalism as a spearheading force. The quest for identity for millions of Blacks in the United States, mingled with native African traditions found an exposition in a very race-conscious religious outlook. One cannot help but sympathize with this 'partisan' approach to Islam, which as a polity wipes out all sorts of discrimination based on racial traits.

Two decades after the emergence of the Nation, the teachings of Elijah Muhammad were reaching every nook and corner of Black America. His appeal reached primarily to the urban lower class Negroes, who had been actually migrants from the race-ridden South. It provided them with a more dynamic identity based on historical, psychological and biblical soundings. The emphasis on education, hard work, mutual co-operation, cleanliness in dress and life-styles, abstention from alcohol and other addictions and so many other spiritual directions, incorporated in the message of Elijah Muhammad influenced almost every thinking Negro, irrespective of his social, economic or regional background. Within a few years temples in every major American town sprang up where trained Black Muslims tried to reach the other Blacks living around. The disciplined form of a new life carried a charismatic appeal for many young Negroes. Famous sportsmen like Muhammad Ali or Karim Abdul Jabbar and enthusiasts like Malcolm X joined the Nation. Financially and socially the Nation progressed tremendously in late 1950s. By 1960s it had become an established middle class venture. The other contemporary Blacks' movements led by Dr. King Jr., or even the militant one like Black Panther Party led by Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver acknowledged the strength of the Black Muslims among the middle class Negroes. Elijah tried to infuse a dynamic sense of pride among his followers through his speeches on radio, leaflets or by writing regularly in *Muhammad Speaks*, the major organ of the Nation. His literature was being widely distributed among the Black prisoners in the American Jails. He would say:

Islam dignifies the black man, and it gives him the desire to be clean internally and externally, and to have for the first time a sense of dignity.²¹

OR

No people strives to lose themselves among other people except the so-called Negroes. This they do because of their lack of knowledge of self. . . .

It is Allah's will and purpose that we shall know ourselves; therefore He came Himself to teach us the knowledge of self. Who is better knowing of who we are than God Himself ? He has declared

that we are descendants of the Asian black nation and the tribe of Shahbaz.²²

With the entry of Malcolm X in the nation, the movement reached the pinnacle of its zenith and popularity. Malcolm was born on May 19, 1925 in an Omaha hospital in Nebraska. His family headed by his Baptist father moved to Lansing, Michigan, where Malcolm spent most of his turbulent childhood. The local racist Whites burnt their house and later on killed his father, too. His mother mentally went insane due to the shock and was admitted into an institution in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Thus the wanderings of Malcolm started which took him to Detroit, Boston and then to Harlem. Caught in the world of crimes and corruption, Malcolm became a hoodlum, who has a pimp spent most of his time in hustling. In the end he landed into a jail where he chanced to read the literature on the Nation of Islam. He was very much impressed by Elijah Muhammad and joined the Nation. After his release, Malcolm became one of the very devoted and most trusted assistants of Elijah Muhammad. At times people even talked about his possible succession to Elijah.

Malcolm X chanced to see the personal life of the leader of the Nation closely and found some contradictions in the beliefs and practices. He, while stationed in Harlem, New York, continued on his missionary activities until the breach between him and the leadership in Chicago was quite evident. As Alex Hailey commented in his *Introduction to the Autobiography of Malcolm X* :

Malcolm's meteoric eruption on the national scene brought him into wider contact with White men who were not the 'devils' he had thought they were. He was in much demand as a speaker at student forums in Eastern universities and had appeared in many by the end of his short career as a national figure. He always spoke respectfully and with a certain surprise of the positive response of white students to his lectures.

A second factor that contributed to his conversion to wider horizons was a growing doubt about the authenticity of Elijah Muhammad's version of the Muslim religion—a doubt that grew into a certainty with more knowledge and more experience. Certain secular practices at the Chicago headquarters of Elijah Muhammad had come to Malcolm's notice and he was profoundly shocked.

Finally, he embarked on a number of prolonged trips to Mecca and the newly independent African states through the good offices of the representatives of the Arab League in the United States. It was on

his first trip to Mecca that he came to the conclusion that he had yet to discover Islam.²³

Malcolm X, then, started preaching a real Islam much to the dismay of leadership in Chicago. He was listened to and respected by millions of Blacks all over. The American establishment got scared of his popularity, too. He did not have enough time for the espousal of Islam, as in early 1965 he got killed in a mysterious way, while beginning his address to an audience in New York.

With the slaying of Malcolm X, the Nation suffered a severe jolt in its very foundations and many of the followers and the observers felt disgusted. However, the movement continued on and still goes on. Malcolm X had the qualities to change the entire course of history in race relations, but he did not have the time to do so. He disagreed with other Black leaders who had different approaches to solve the age-old problem of the Blacks. His debates with contemporary Black leaders or the White intellectuals explain the dynamic but mellow leadership of this revolutionary.²⁴

The Nation of Islam, under the guidance of Elijah Muhammad widely borrowed from the sources of Islam and impressed upon his followers the importance of Arabic. Indirectly, this attitude has played a very healthy role in the eventual 'Islamization' of the Nation under the able leadership of Wallace D. Muhammad, the son and the successor of late Elijah Muhammad. Mr. Wallace Muhammad was born on October 30, 1933 in Detroit, Michigan: "He received his entire elementary and high school education at the University of Islam, and spent four additional years studying Islam and Arabic in a Muslim school. An Egyptian who taught Arabic at the University of Islam rates Minister Wallace's command of the language as well above the average. Before he decided for the Ministry, Minister Wallace explained that he was very interested in science and electronics."²⁵

Mr. Wallace Muhammad worked for Oxford Electric Company in Chicago off and on between 1952 and 1954 and was making 54 \$ per week. He got terminated due to irregular attendance and then started working for the restaurant owned by the temple. Then Mr. Muhammad lived in Philadelphia where he carried on his work as a missionary and proving himself a young man whose devotion to his father and the Muslims is unquestioned."²⁶ Mr. Muhammad while becoming the leader of the Nation has tried to introduce many dynamic changes in the beliefs and practices of the Black Muslims. He changed their name from the Black Muslims to Bilallians. He encourages their associations with the other

Muslims and sends their delegations to Mecca and other places in the Islamic world. The temples are called mosques and the 'segregationist' attitudes of the Nation are disappearing. Their weekly is now known as *The Bilallian News*, and carries news items on personalities and events in the entire Muslim world. People like Muhammad Ali openly associate with the non-American Muslims, like by investing money in poor Muslim countries like Bangladesh. He, rather, generously has become the honorary Consul for Bangladesh in Chicago. This 'opening' of the movement owes tremendously to the new leadership of the movement.

The brief history of the Bilallians is actually the history of the millions of Blacks who through their centuries of toils and sufferings found rays of hopes in Islam. The Nation presents a study in cultural evolution, where nationalistic feelings joined with a quest for identity find roots in a more comfortable polity—Islam, and work for it sincerely. Before deciding on their intentions one has to study the horrors of slavery and continuum of racial prejudices, which until today remain an untold story for outsiders. The history of the Nation of Islam in North America is the history of a part of Third World, in distant and unknown lands, where everything was imagined to be 'all-white' and all-perfect.

The Bilallians attend the regular meetings of the Muslim communities in North America. One meets them at Friday prayers, Eid prayers, meetings of the *Tablighi* parties or even in the function of the *Muslim Students Association of the US, Canada and Mexico*. The annual convention of MSA in Bloomington, Indiana, always receives a big contingent of the Bilallian Muslims. Their enthusiasm for Islam is a well-known reality in North America and one sometimes feels like subscribing to the idea that the renaissance of Islam might come from the North America with these people as its torch-bearers.

NOTES

1. Alex Hailey, ed., *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, New York, 1973, p. 435.
2. E. U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America*, Chicago, 1971, p. 6.
3. Winthrop D. Jordan, *The White Man's Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States*, New York, 1974, p. 45.
4. Gerald Sorin, *Abolitionism: A New Perspective*, New York, 1973, pp. 26-29.
5. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, New York, 1957, pp. 155-159.

6. Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography and Other Writings*, New York, 1961.
7. Sorin, *op. cit.*, p. 48. Also see Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, New York, 1960.
8. Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, Boston, 1892.
9. Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery*, New York, 1901. Also recorded by Ossie Davis, New York, Coedmon Records, 1976.
10. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Greenwich, Conn, 1961.
11. Allain Locke, "The New Negro", in Houston A. Baker Jr., ed., *Black Literature in America*, New York, 1971, p. 152.
12. Leroi Jones, "City of Harlem," in William Makely, ed., *City Life*, New York, 1974, p. 24.
13. Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem, The Making of a Ghetto, 1890-1930*, New York, 1968, pp. 7-8.
14. John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, New York, 1940.
15. Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money*, New York, 1968.
16. Essien-Udom, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
He is recorded to have said: "I am W.D. Fard, . . . and I came from the Holy City of Mecca. More about myself I will not tell you yet, for the time is not yet come. I am your brother.
You have not seen me in my royal robes."—Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy, *They Seek a City*, Garden City, New York, 1945, p. 178.
17. Erdmann D. Benyon, "The Voodoo Cult Among Negro Migrants in Detroit" *American Journal of Sociology*, XLIII, No. 6, May 1938. The quotation is based on an interview with a follower.
18. Essien-Udom, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
21. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 83.
22. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 122.
23. Alex Hailey, *op. cit.*, p. XIII.
24. Ben Richardson and William A. Fahey, *Great Black Americans*, New York, 1976, pp. 218-229.
25. Essien-Udom, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-82,
26. *Ibid.*, p. 82.