

**Cultural Identity Construction of Malcolm X as Seen in
Malcolm X (1992)**

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Cultural Identity Construction of Malcolm X As Seen in *Malcolm X* (1992)

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ABSTRACT

Cultural identity is a person's special characteristics or condition that reflects one's nationality. However, it becomes difficult especially for immigrants to determine their cultural identity because they have two different cultures, the culture of their ancestor and the culture in which they are living now. This problem happens to African American who lives in America, and it is depicted in *Malcolm X*, a 1992 film directed by Spike Lee. This research is intended to analyze the cultural identity construction of African American especially through the figure of Malcolm X. This is a descriptive qualitative research with narrative approach method and uses documentation technique as the strategy of inquiry. As for the theory, it uses the concept of cultural identity and diaspora theory by Stuart Hall. Based on the analysis of the movie, it is found that the cultural identity of Malcolm X is slightly complex. He undergoes two phases in cultural identity construction, that is both oneness and becoming.

Keywords: *Malcolm X, African American, Cultural Identity, Stuart Hall*

STATE ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY
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Konstruksi Identitas Budaya Malcolm X Dalam Film *Malcolm X*

1992

Oleh: Riska Waskita Sari

ABSTRAK

Identitas budaya adalah ciri atau kondisi khusus seseorang yang mencerminkan kebangsaannya. Namun, hal ini menjadi sulit terutama bagi para imigran untuk menentukan identitas budaya mereka karena mereka memiliki dua budaya yang berbeda, budaya dari mana mereka berasal dan budaya di mana mereka tinggal sekarang. Masalah ini terjadi pada Afrika Amerika yang tinggal di Amerika, dan masalah ini digambarkan dalam film *Malcolm X* (1992). Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis konstruksi identitas budaya Afrika Amerika khususnya dari sosok Malcolm X. Tipe penelitian ini adalah deskriptif kualitatif dengan metode pendekatan naratif dan menggunakan teknik dokumentasi sebagai strategi pemeriksaan. Penelitian ini menggunakan konsep identitas budaya dan teori diaspora oleh Stuart Hall. Berdasarkan analisis film, ditemukan bahwa identitas budaya Malcolm X sedikit kompleks. Malcolm X mengalami dua perubahan identitas budaya baik bersatu dengan budaya nenek moyang maupun berasimilasi dengan budaya baru.

Kata Kunci: *Malcolm X, Afrika Amerika, Identitas Budaya, Stuart Hall*

MOTTO

Every person has their own time. We can't imitate every single thing that most of the people do. I think it's really inhumane things when we have to live on the other people's life.

-Riska Waskita-



DEDICATION

The highest dedication the researcher gives to:

My beloved parents, Wawan Hastaka and Woro Lena Hernawati



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The researcher realizes that this graduating paper is very far from being perfect. Therefore, any criticisms and suggestions are always needed to improve this graduating paper.

Yogyakarta, December 7, 2021



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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

Cultural identity is a person's special characteristics or condition as a result of social construction that reflects race, ethnicity, nation, language, religion, and gender. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communication, cultural identity is the definition of a group or an individual in terms of cultural or subcultural categories including ethnicity, nationality, language, religion, and gender (Chandler and Munday, 2011: 137). Culture is an important factor in shaping one's identity; a person's cultural environment influences the culture he chooses (Tawfiq Yousef, 2019:71). Sometimes someone feels difficult to recognize their cultural identity especially for immigrants who have two different cultures, the culture where they come from and the culture where they are located now. Each member of these immigrants brought their race, nationality, language, and culture to a new place, which became both a matter of pride and a problem in their new place. An example is the presence of Black African slave immigrants in the United States who had a negative and inferior image.

Slavery gave black African slave immigrants a bad stereotype. It made them have a lower status in the American social order and indirectly affected their cultural identity. Restrictions, humiliation, and lack of freedom were the results of the miserable condition of slavery. According to Bruce Dierenfield (2013: 31)

slaves are defined as property and are prohibited from speaking their mother tongue, practicing their religion, or naming their children. Their freedom, wages, marriage, and right to vote were restricted (Sitkoff, 1993:5). The social conditions that occurred to Black African slave immigrants at that time slowly erased the sense of pride in their race and culture as African American.

On the other hand, according to Hana Markova (2008:9), slavery experienced by Africans in America lasted for years, and it was enough to build a social order that distinguished them into white and black society, superior and inferior race. Those who categorize themselves as a superior race tend to commit acts of racism against middle and lower racial groups. Racism is the belief that some racial groups are naturally superior and the others are inferior (Hughes and Kroehler, 2010:214). The increasing public assumptions about superior race and middle-lower race in line with the increasing case number of racism. The problem of racism has not been resolved even though the campaign of tolerance have been declared everywhere. Racism is one of the factors driving discrimination, oppression and segregation. Racism and discrimination are two things that cannot be separated. According to Theodorson & Theodorson (1979:115), discrimination is unequal treatment against individuals or groups based on categorical, unique attributes such as race, ethnicity, religion or membership of social classes.

According to Norman R. Yetman (1997:284) the most racial discrimination case occurred from the minority of African American. African American racial discrimination case is depicted in *Malcolm X (1992)*, a film directed by Spike Lee. It is a biographical movie about Afro-American activist, Malcolm X. The director

was inspired by the book “Autobiography of Malcolm X” by Alex Haley and Malcolm X. The main character is played by Denzel Washington as Malcolm X. This movie has 200 minutes of the duration and gains 48.2 million USD for the profit. This movie tells us not only about the racial discrimination and the struggle of the minority to fight for their rights but also about the process of forming the main character in finding his identity.

The main character in this movie is named Malcolm X, who was later called El-Hajj Malik El-Shabbaz. Malcolm X was an influential African American in America around the nineteenth century. Malcolm was a good figure representing a black man that was able to forge his self-identity in the hard time. This movie tells how racial discrimination through the black men can perfectly construct their own identity. Malcolm as an African American who still carries the original, cultural identity of his ancestors has difficulty mingling with the conditions of American society at that time. Racism and racial discrimination that occur continuously make Malcolm fail to assimilate with the new culture and lose his identity. To break away from the negative stigma and the racism practice, he, like other black men, at some point in life is tempted to change their identity into the white identity. They compete to look like white men in fashion, hair style, food, language style, and culture to make sure that they can merge into the white society and enjoy their white privilege. The white identity does not last long until he finds his community and national identity which helps Malcolm build his cultural perception and presence in American society at that time. The unity of African Americans who have a common culture, vision, and mission makes them become a strong community that can

provide themselves with a sense of security, support and struggle for rights that they do not receive as a second class immigrant society.

Indirectly this racial discrimination constructs Malcolm's identity to become various identities depending on where it is located and for what needs. This is in line with Hall's theory which says identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted. Regarding this, the researcher assumes that racial discrimination plays a significant role in the shaping of the Malcolm's identity as African American. This attracts the researcher to analyze and find out the process of cultural identity through Malcolm's character because Malcolm undergoes several identity changes depending on where he is and for what needs.

1.2 Research Question

According to the background of the study, this research is intended to find out the answer of this following question: How is the cultural identity of Malcolm X constructed?

1.3 Objective of the Study

From the research question above, this research aims to explain the cultural identity construction of Malcolm X.

1.4 Significances of the Study

This research hopefully contributes to the study of cultural identity construction, especially of Muslim character, in English Literature Department, as well as help students in this department understand how to apply cultural identity theory by Stuart Hall. Also, this research is intended to demonstrate Hall's concept of cultural identity and diaspora as well as its application to African American diaspora especially through the main character, Malcolm X.

1.5 Literature Review

The researcher finds some prior researchers who had the same object and theory. The first literature was published in 2020 by Tri Ayu Widyaningsih from Yogyakarta State Islamic University. The title of the thesis is "*Cultural Identity Construction of Pakistani Muslim Diaspora as Seen in Wajahat Ali's The Domestic Crusaders*". In her research, Ayu uses the theory of Cultural Identity by Stuart Hall to find a reconstruction of Pakistani Muslim identity. This study focuses more on the reconstruction of the cultural identity experienced by Pakistani Muslims which is described through the drama script of Wajahat Ali's *The Domestic Crusaders*. There are several differences that distinguish this study from the author's research. The first one is differences in material objects. This research carries the drama script of Wajahat Ali's *The Domestic Crusaders*, while the author carries a movie entitled *Malcolm X*. The second is different actor contexts. This study analyzes the reconstruction of Pakistani Muslim cultural identity, while the author analyzes the reconstruction of African American cultural identity. The third is the different

issues behind the reconstruction of the character's identity. The reconstruction of cultural identity in this research is motivated by the issue of 9/11 attack, while the thing behind the reconstruction of cultural identity in the author's research is enslavement. The differences also exist in the results of the two research, where the findings of the study are that Pakistani Muslims have lost their ancestral cultural identity and assimilated to form a new identity, while the results of the author's research are that Malcolm X as an African American experiences several changes in cultural identity, both oneness and becoming.

The second literature was written by Willy Utomo, for his thesis at the University of Indonesia. The title of the thesis is "*Biography of Malcolm X: a Portrait of Racism and Afro Americans Cultural Identity Crisis*". This thesis examines the issue of racism and African-American cultural identity from Malcolm's point of view. The significant difference that distinguishes this study from the author's research is that this thesis focuses more on describing the racism, prejudice, discrimination and cultural identity crisis presented by African Americans themselves by Malcolm's point of view, while the author's research focuses more on the result of cultural identity constructions experienced by Malcolm X during his lifetime based on Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity. Further differences are also seen in the findings of the two research where the findings of this study are stereotypes and prejudices among white people, while the author's finding is more about three changes of Malcolm's cultural identity influenced by location and Malcolm's needs according to Stuart Hall's theory. In addition, the researcher also provides the novelty of this research by adding film

theory with framing technique to support and strengthen the meaning of each data that has been found.

The third literature was written by John Barresi for his paper needs. The title of the paper is "*The Identities of Malcolm X*". This paper more focuses on describing Malcolm's life and identities. The significant difference that distinguishes this study from the author's research is that this paper uses the personal and social identity theory of Tajfel and Erickson, while the author's research uses Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity. The findings of this study are Malcolm's search for a positive identity for both himself and most African Americans illustrating how personal and social identities are intertwined.

1.6 Theoretical Approach

In this research, the researcher uses two theories that support each other. They are cultural identity and diaspora theory by Stuart Hall and film theory by Villarejo.

1.6.1. Cultural Identity and Diaspora Theory

In this study, the researcher uses cultural identity and diaspora theory by Stuart Hall. This theory is very helpful to understand the construction of Malcolm's cultural identity, where Malcolm basically is not a Native American, but has lost his ancestral cultural identity due to the social order of American society that is not on his side.

Stuart Hall was a post-colonialist who paid attention to cultural identity, especially on the representation of blacks. This theory stated that Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation (Hall, 1990: 222).

According to Stuart Hall, there are two different ways of thinking about cultural identity: Oneness and Becoming. First, cultural identity is an identity that is owned by people who come from the same history and ancestors who bond them into a unity of society. Cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning (Hall, 1990: 223)

Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere and have histories. However, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essential past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture, and power (Hall, 1990: 223).

1.6.2. Film Theory

Film is a moving picture that tells a story and meaning. According to Hornby (2006:950) movie means a series of moving pictures recorded with sound that tells a story, shown at cinema/movie. Due to the object of this research is a movie, film theory is needed to analyze and support the previous theory. According to Stam (2006:6) film theory is an evolving body of concepts designed to account for the cinema in all its dimensions (aesthetic, social, psychological) for an interpretive community of scholars, critics, and interested spectators. Each data presented in the form of screenshot in this research has its own meaning, manifestly or impliedly. Film theory will make researcher easy to understand and interpret each of these meanings. This research focuses on cinematography to analyze and describe the situation happening on the screenshot data. According to Villarejo (2007: 38) framing techniques is divided into seven types:

- a. The extreme long shot (ELS), in which one can barely distinguish the human figure;
- b. The long-shot (LS), in which humans are distinguishable but remain dwarfed by the background;
- c. The medium-long shot (MLS), or plan American, in which the human is framed from the knees up;
- d. The medium shot (MS), in which we move in slightly to frame the human from the waist up;

- e. The medium close-up (MCU), in which we are slightly closer and see the human from the chest up;
- f. The close-up (CU), which isolates a portion of a human (the face, most prominently);
- g. The extreme close-up (ECU), in which we see a mere portion of the face (an eye, the lips).

1.7 Methods of Research

1.7.1 Type of Research

The type of this research is descriptive qualitative with narrative approach method. According to Bogdan and Tylor (2000:3) as quoted by Lexi Moleong, it is mentioned that what is meant by qualitative descriptive is the method used to analyze data by describing the data through the form of written words or verbally from people and observed behavior. In addition, the author uses a narrative approach to describe event by event slowly based on a certain theme or perspective so that the analysis result is expected to focus more on discussing the narrative object of someone's life. According to James Schreiber dan Kimberly Asner-Self (2011), narrative research is the study of individuals' lives as told through the stories of their experiences, including a discussion of the meaning of experiences for individuals. Therefore, descriptive qualitative with narrative approach is used to

find and deeply explore the social phenomena about racial discrimination behind *Malcolm X* especially in the way to understand detailed picture of issues of cultural identity through the main character, Malcolm X.

1.7.2 Data Sources

The researcher uses two data sources. The main data of this research is the movie “Malcolm X” itself. In addition, this research will be supported by relevant information from books, journal, news item and article which are still related with the topic.

1.7.3 Data Collection Technique

This research uses documentation technique as the strategy of inquiry. Document analysis technique is a form of qualitative research in which documents are interpreted by the researcher to give voice and meaning around an assessment topic (Bowen, 2009). This documentation technique is the most suitable technique for this object of material, considering that the object of research is an autobiography. To collect the main data, there were several steps which had been done. Firstly, the researcher watched the movie several times to ensure that the researcher got the essential substance of the issues of racial discrimination and to make sure that there was no scene missed because of the long duration of the movie. The researcher also read the original book to help understand the movie. Secondly, the researcher also searched and read books, journal, news item and article that are related with the topic to strengthen both of the data and the evidence.

1.7.4 Data Analysis Technique

In this research the data are analyzed with descriptive qualitative with narrative approach method. The narrative approach focuses more on the study of an individual that describes and collects stories about individuals. According to Webster and Metrova on Using Narrative Inquiry as a Research Method (2009: 43) the essence of the narrative inquiry method is the ability of this method to understand identity and view a person's world by referring to the stories (narratives) he hears or says in everyday life. The researcher uses this method because the paper discusses the concepts of a problem that is not accompanied by numerical data, and this method is considered the most suitable for explaining or describing the object of this research in the form of an autobiography of a Malcolm X. In the data analysis technique, the researcher did several steps. The first step was data collection. In this step the author watched *Malcolm X* (1992) and collected the main data from it. The second step is to analyze the process of Malcolm X's cultural identity construction, which is the main research question. The data are categorized based on the main concepts and variables of cultural identity and diaspora theory by Stuart Hall. The last step is crosscheck the data to achieve a final conclusion.

1.8 Paper Organization

In organizing this paper, the writer classifies this paper into four chapters; introduction, intrinsic elements, analysis, and conclusions. The first chapter, the introduction contains the background for selecting issues and research objects, problem statements, objectives of study, significance of study, literature review, theoretical approach, methods of research, and paper organization. The second chapter, the intrinsic element contains the information related to the research object in the form of a summary of the movie, theme, setting of place, setting of time, setting of social conditions, characters and characterizations, plot, and point of view. The third chapter, the analysis is the main chapter which contains the analysis of the *Malcolm X* film to answer the problem statement. This chapter focuses on the Malcolm's identity changes that went through during his lifetime. The last chapter, the conclusion contains a summary of the research results from the *Malcolm X* movie.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

4.1 Conclusion

Based on the analysis of cultural identity construction of Malcolm X as seen in *Malcolm X* movie, it can be concluded that the cultural identity construction of Malcolm X is slightly complex. Based on the concept of cultural identity and diaspora theory by Stuart Hall about oneness and becoming, it is found that Malcolm experiences two changes in cultural identity, both oneness and becoming. The cultural identity's changing of Malcolm and most African-American people is built and constructed by the history of slavery and racial practices of white people as the background of event which finally makes African Americans have an inferior status in American society. The loss of pride in their race and culture makes them split away from each other and need to adapt to new culture and situation that happen in American society at that time. From this research, the researcher finds that Malcolm X undergoes several significant cultural identity changes which the author later classifies as White American Identity, Radical Black Nationalist, and African American Sunni Muslim. This research also finds that an individual can be anything depending on where he is and for what needs. Malcolm's cultural identity changes are influenced by the location where Malcolm is located and for what purposes. It can be seen from the three changes of Malcolm's cultural identity that the place and environment in which he is located greatly affect Malcolm's mindset that finally leads him to the change of his new cultural identity. This finding is what distinguishes the author's research from previous studies. This study discusses and

focuses on the results of construction and housing factors that encourage the construction of cultural identity experienced by Malcolm himself.

First, Malcolm's cultural identity as White American Identity here involves the process of assimilation of Malcolm's culture, from the culture of his black ancestors to the white American culture that is more acceptable to all levels of society. This first cultural identity construction happens on Boston City, which is the largest city in Massachusetts inhabited by Americans of all races including blacks and whites. Second, Malcolm's cultural identity as Radical Black Nationalist includes the process of recognizing the existence of the black race for himself. This second change occurs when Malcolm is located in Charlestown State Prison and meets Baines who makes him realize that black is precious. The last cultural identity construction of Malcolm before he dies is African American Sunni Muslim. This last Malcolm's cultural identity construction involves the process of purifying the culture of Malcolm's black ancestors regardless of the specific organizational goals with the true teachings of Islam. Malcolm's last cultural identity construction occurs when he makes a pilgrimage to Mecca. In Mecca, Malcolm is confronted by hundreds or even thousands of people from various racial, ethnic, and cultural groups who carry out activities in the same place. Malcolm believes that the true teachings of Islam are the answer to all the problems of the practice of racism that occur in America. Malcolm also realizes that the true teachings of Islam do not discriminate against certain groups or races, all of whom have the same position and rights for black, white, and other races.

Basically, the cultural identity construction of Malcolm X diaspora tends to change depending on the place and the needs that lie behind it. A place includes factors of historical events and has an impact on the mindset and social conditions of the people in that place. Furthermore, the diaspora is required to adapt to the new place as well as all the factors of the historical events that lie behind the place. The act of adapting to the local culture is the diaspora's instinct to survive and merge into the social order to be more acceptable to all levels of society. The diaspora's adaptation toward the new place varies depending on the needs of each individual. It can be by getting involved in the local culture and trying to erase the culture of origin, by trying to unite races and refusing racial discrimination practices, and also by changing one's view of a particular race. The cultural identity of Malcolm X covers all parts of Hall's theory of oneness and becoming. The factors of historical events that make Malcolm try to erase the original identity of his ancestors in the end also bring Malcolm back to unite his race against racial injustice on American land.

4.2 Suggestion

This *Malcolm X* movie tells the story of the struggle of Malcolm X and most African Americans to find out their justice and equal rights as diaspora on American land despite the harsh clashes of racism practices that happen to black society. That is why the researcher uses the concept of Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity and diaspora. Among the main issues behind this movie, there are several other interesting aspects for further research by further researchers such as the types and

forms of discrimination that occur in Malcolm X and most of African Americans at that time.



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