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Fatima-al-zahraa Ahmad Ramy

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The American University in Cairo

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

SPIRITUAL RECONCILIATION AND SELF-DISCOVERY: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF AL-GHAZALI AND MALCOLM X

A Thesis Submitted to

The Department of English and Comparative Literature

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

By

Fatima-al-zahraa Ahmad Ramy

Under the supervision of **Dr. Tahia Abdel Nasser**

September/2014

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Has been approved by

Dr. Tahia Abdel Nasser
Thesis Committee Advisor_____
Affiliation_____

Dr. Ferial Ghazoul
Thesis Committee Reader_____
Affiliation_____

Dr. Mounira Soliman
Thesis Committee Reader_____
Affiliation_____

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    Dept. Chair   Date   Dean of HUSS   Date

DEDICATION

To the memory of both Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and Malcolm X
whose autobiographies inspired the production of this thesis.

And to all figures of enlightening thought throughout history
whose sincere appreciation of dedicated research contribute to
the enrichment of human thought and civilization.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABSTRACT

The American University in Cairo

**Spiritual Reconciliation and Self-Discovery:
The Autobiographies of al-Ghazali and Malcolm X**

Fatima-al-zahraa Ahmad Ramy

Advisor: Dr. Tahia Abdel Nasser

In examining the dynamic relation between both spirituality and the self within society, this thesis focuses on two autobiographical works, *Deliverance from Error* (c. 1106) by the medieval Persian theologian Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) by the contemporary African American political activist Malcolm X. Both texts are examined in light of Paul John Eakin's notions of autonomous individualism versus cultural determinism in autobiography as explained in his book *Touching the World* (1992). Through Eakin's perception of autobiographical production as an expression ultimately reflecting the interrelatedness between the individual and the surrounding society, this comparative study examines both works as spiritual narratives that express their authors' views on spirituality and individualism in relation to their communities along an arduous process of self-development. Despite belonging to different historical, geographical, and cultural settings, both al-Ghazali and Malcolm X delineate their remarkable spiritual journeys emphasizing the role of liberated individual investigation in attaining both spiritual solace as well as genuine understanding and assertion of their selfhoods in society.

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Introduction

In examining the relation between religion and the self and tracing whether religion helps a person better understand oneself and the surrounding world, on the one hand, or imposes restrictions on such development, on the other, a crucial factor that determines either outcome could lie in observing how much one's spiritual endeavors are free and liberated from preconceived spiritual notions or misconceptions present in society. As vital as such liberation is to the existence and thriving of both religion and the self, it is when either of them ceases to develop freely in a rapidly changing and constantly evolving world that a dilemma occurs. Thus, at different intervals in history, religion has often served as a liberating force advocating self-understanding and emancipation while at other times it has been manipulated to restrict and suppress one's self-expression and development in society.

Such ambivalence in the relation between religion and the self often leads, consequently, to significant recurring tensions, hence giving rise to several observations as to what governs this relation and how such tensions originate. Observing the role of the individual in this relation, Roger Gottlieb claims that:

> some religious voices are making the world better and some worse; some are ready to recognize the basic principles of democracy and human rights, and others long for the days when the religious authorities could order heretics burned at stake. These differences are not random, but systematic. For a *faith* to be *liberating*, it must change, develop, and progress: in a sense, it must become liberated *itself*. (xx, italics in original)

Therefore, for religion to serve as a liberating force for the self, it needs an environment of free expression and research in which it could thrive. Such an environment could only be secured through individuals whose sincere appreciation of freedom and genuine pursuit of truth allow them to undergo constant development along the different stages of their life journeys.

Chronicling such a developing relation between religion and themselves to readers through their own personal experiences, writers choose several literary forms that best serve their purpose. However, the genre of autobiography, in particular, has been a rich reservoir for readers to gain a closer insight into the diverse life experiences autobiographers have to offer along their spiritual quests. Since classical times, autobiographical production has undoubtedly gone through different phases and has been presented through various literary forms. Whether they were ancient tomb inscriptions narrating the deceased's life journey in the first-person, travel narratives chronicled by medieval pilgrims, or personal testimonies documented by influential figures of modern history, autobiographical narratives have proved to be an invaluable source that enables readers to better appreciate the scope of human potential, experience, and impact. However, despite such diverse phases and forms, a certain feature persists in the genre: the portrayal of the writer's self-development. Thus, Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as "a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality" ("The Autobiographical Contract" 193).

While autobiographical writings viewed in this light might be regarded as mere personal accounts belonging to specific historical times that lack genuine literary value, it is argued that "[o]nly when a balance is struck between the unique and the universal, when the personal life experience is made meaningful or relevant to society, only then does the autobiography become a work of art and a historical document" (Philipp 577). Therefore, in relating their individual life experiences, autobiographers nevertheless are aware of the collective body of readers – especially

in their societies – that is to receive their works and is invited to identify with or at least interact with them.

Although the act of writing one's life narrative could be motivated by a multitude of pursuits and reasons, Aimable Twagilimana – in commenting on early African American autobiographical writings, for example – claims that "writing by 'I' is inseparable from the action of self-liberation" (22). Such a feature does not only define early African American narratives, but is also inherent in autobiographical writings in general. It is the liberating force embedded in the genre that inspires a writer to undergo a journey toward self-discovery and self-understanding. Furthermore, in his analysis of Geoffrey Galt Harpham's "Conversion and the Language of Autobiography" (1988), J. Kameron Carter states that

> *mimesis*, or imitation, is crucial to self-narration. "Successfully" narrating oneself implies a nonidentical repetition that, in fact, liberates the self by enlarging it to embrace, revitalize, and re-create reality. In autobiography . . . the self is transfigured, which is to say liberated, from closure or hiddenness. To autobiographically tell the story of the self is to expand the self and so expand the world. In this way, the particularity of the self through writing comes out of its cloister, as it were, into visibility. The self becomes opaque for others and thus to itself. This is very much a "religious" experience . . . a "conversion". (259, italics in original)

Hence, relating one's personal life experience in an autobiography is not only liberating to one's own self, but also to the body of readers being exposed to the work who by recognizing the value of individual experience communicated through the text, learn to appreciate their own individualities as well. Focusing on the landmark autobiographies of the medieval Persian scholar, philosopher, and religious intellectual Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (c. 1058-1111) and the contemporary African American civil rights activist Malcolm X (1925-1965), this thesis examines both works in light of Paul John Eakin's views on the role of autobiography in defining the relation between the individual and society. In his book *Fictions in Autobiography*

(1985), Eakin emphasizes the role of some autobiographical writings that allow their authors – attempting to assert their existence and individuality in society – to employ an "art of self-invention" as they "create a space in which the self can live and move in response to its own volition" (275-78).

However, in his later work, *Touching the World* (1992), Eakin revises such an assumption, which significantly exaggerates the view of individual autonomy presented in an autobiography, admitting he had underestimated the role of society and culture in defining an individual's view of himself. Clarifying his revised argument, he asserts:

> It is not my intention, however, to steer clear of a posture of absolutely autonomous individualism only to embrace an equally absolute version of cultural determinism. What I want to demonstrate instead . . . is a sense of the autobiographical act as performed not in some wholly private, fictive realm of the isolate self but rather in strenuous engagement with the pressures that life in culture entails. (71)

Therefore, in light of Eakin's exploration of the interrelatedness between both the individual and the collective in autobiography, the narratives of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and Malcolm X will be studied in their dynamic relation to the surrounding society. As Antonio C. Márquez similarly regards autobiography as essentially an expression of both self and culture (63), both narratives purposely present their communities to the readers, challenging certain popular religious views upheld in them and praising other less popular ones. In spite of the limited popularity of such views, both writers, nevertheless, regard them as more appreciative of one's individuality as they rely on personal investigation and advocate self-knowledge rather than simply adopting established collective views. In doing so, both writers are able to discover and assert their selfhoods in their societies.

Within this framework, the thesis focuses on the relation between the spiritual experiences both influential figures lived through and how that affected their journeys toward self-discovery and self-development. They are two prominent historical figures of Islamic thought who despite belonging to different contexts, historically and culturally – al-Ghazali being a medieval Persian religious scholar and Malcolm X a contemporary African American political activist – similarly attempt to share their own personal life experiences with their societies and the world at large. Their autobiographical works are not mere personal accounts that portray their journeys toward discovering, understanding, and developing themselves, but rather valuable literary and historical works that communicate such transformative life journeys to their readers as acts of rebellion to subvert some popular notions and attitudes to which they object.

In both works, the writers challenge the strongly held views related to Islam in their communities, whether the authority of individuals, an institution, or even an ideology. Despite the diverse and hard challenges they face as a consequence, the significant element stressed throughout their writings is the assertion of their individual, free search for genuine spiritual knowledge that is not influenced by the various prevailing political or social interests, however popular they often seem to be in these societies. They refuse to give in to the hegemony that their collective communities sometimes exercise and impose upon them, stressing their individuality instead.

Both al-Ghazali and Malcolm X challenged several cultural and political authorities prevailing at the time they wrote their autobiographies, offering liberating, rational, and peaceful views of Islam. Al-Ghazali especially refused the domination of certain religious and intellectual views, despite their popularity, over others. Likewise,

Malcolm X challenged certain popular religious views then which validated a political scene tarnished by racist ideologies. Although they believed their religion could offer liberating and progressive views on cultural and political issues, both writers ironically belong to two different locales, medieval Iran and modern-day United States, where Islam is occasionally blamed for suppressing self-expression or advocating violence.

Thus, these two autobiographical works stand as significant examples that show how different the case was in earlier times in both locations; how their writers chose this genre to relate stories that assert the role of Islam whether in supporting freedom of thought and expression or promoting ideals of peace and tolerance. The works portray the writers' individual quests toward spiritual reconciliation whereby they understand the truth about their religion regardless of the views widely adopted of it by their societies. These quests are influenced by their troubled pasts in which they suffer spiritual crises of skepticism within their societies' restricted views on spirituality. Consequently, the writers relate both their physical and spiritual journeys through which they attain spiritual salvation as well as self-discovery and understanding.

In his *Deliverance from Error* (c. 1106), al-Ghazali explains the rich body of intellectual and religious schools of thought present during his time, an era often referred to as the Islamic Golden Age.[1] However, rather than narrating irrelevant details of his personal life, al-Ghazali focuses more on narrating how frustrated he becomes because of a confusing cultural and philosophical milieu that eventually leads him through a personal crisis of uncertainty in which he loses interest in all previous accomplishments, and decides to undertake a journey toward certainty and self-discovery.

Hence, al-Ghazali analyzes and evaluates each of the prominent schools of thought that were especially winning ground during early twelfth century Persia in place of the more orthodox ones until he reaches a state of peace he finds in mysticism. He narrates not only his physical journey in which he keeps moving amongst different cities seeking truthful knowledge, but also his spiritual journey through which his views undergo several changes until he eventually finds peace in what he regards as the certainty of genuine Islamic knowledge.

Al-Ghazali's autobiography is an example of a tradition that flourished during medieval times where autobiographical writings were not only a means of expressing one's self-development in life but also a kind of spiritual purgation by confessing one's imperfect past deeds and attitudes toward spirituality, a confession which then paves the way to subsequent knowledge and insight. Therefore, he chooses to relate how misguided his endeavors are in some instances during his life and then explains how his close analysis of the contemporary trends of thought, which he meticulously dissects and closely analyzes in the work, help him reach his ultimate model of spiritual truth found in mysticism. In his notable book on the tradition of Arabic autobiography *Interpreting the Self*, Dwight F. Reynolds emphasizes the role of "individual accomplishments and intellectual production" in structuring a large body of autobiographical writings during the Islamic Middle Ages ("Introduction" 5). He specifically categorizes al-Ghazali's spiritual narrative as one principally intended to guide similar seekers of truthful spiritual knowledge (9); hence, a work that surpasses the self to communicate with its collective body of readers as well.

Consequently, al-Ghazali's autobiographical work was not only significant and influential during its time as a major work by an esteemed scholar that helped shape people's awareness of spiritual issues but is also still a landmark literary work

in modern times that provides readers with a clearer view of both the medieval Islamic philosophical milieu and literary scene. The impact that this autobiography has on Islamic personal narratives attests to its contribution to the genre and the legacy it created. Duncan B. Macdonald celebrates the enduring and significant features of the legacy of the medieval theologian, philosopher, and autobiographer:

> It is his spiritually real and living side of his character and work that constitutes his abiding interest for us. Other theologians of Islam are important as links in an historical chain; he, in virtue of what he was in himself, of the conversion he went through and the experiences he had. . . .We are fortunate in that he has left us a book almost unique to my knowledge in the literature of Islam, in which he tells us about his early doubts and struggles. (72-74)

This delineation of personal worries and individual concerns underscores al-Ghazali's role in developing an appreciation of individuality vis-à-vis the authority of the collective. Thus, Ebrahim Moosa explores this appreciation in the medieval writer's work, noting that the latter firmly insists that "a certain amount of individual independence is not only desirable but necessary in matters of ethics and self-transformation" (256) to challenge the authority often imposed on the self by restrictive social norms and limitations.

Similarly, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) describes the journeys that Malcolm X goes through from being a child of an oppressed family to the time he finds his path in life as a defender of his oppressed people's rights through Islamic preaching. However, unlike al-Ghazali, he undergoes a more radical change from being a dangerous convict chased in his ghetto to becoming a role model preacher and activist praised across the globe. Born into Christianity and a victim of racial discrimination as an African American, his change to a Muslim human rights activist makes his journey probably more radical than that of al-Ghazali.

In mid-twentieth century American society, several calls for equal civil rights had begun to emerge such as the African American Civil Rights Movement,[2] culminating during the fifties and sixties in the struggle for equal voting rights for "black" Americans. However, Malcolm X nurtured more severe views of equality during his early years with the Nation of Islam (NOI)[3] where he defended black supremacy and hatred against "white" Americans. Nevertheless, such views and discourses change drastically in the following years where he denounces such hatred and believes that racism should not be subverted by the construction of another form of racism, but rather by the propagation of true ideals of equality and tolerance which he finds in the more orthodox teachings of Islam. Such a transition is far from easy; it is one that he is able to realize by undertaking both physical and spiritual journeys that guide him to experience peace and contentment.

With a rich heritage, Malcolm X's autobiographical work has its roots in early African American literary production when the genre of autobiography, in particular, was a means to challenge the different forms of racial prejudice and "became a very public way of declaring oneself free, of redefining freedom and then assigning it to oneself in defiance of one's bonds to the past or to the social, political, and sometimes even the moral exigencies of the present" (Andrews xi). In the modern world, the writer continues to employ autobiography as a means to challenge all forms of political hegemony that he faces in his community whether by "white" or "black" fellow Americans, asserting his individuality and freedom. Since the early slave narratives that established the substantial literary tradition of African American life writing and through which their writers expressed their yearning for racial equality and self-liberation, the story of Malcolm X stands as a significant work through which he "continued the story of other black autobiographers but expanded the African

American story into new horizons of identity" (Guzzio 24). Hence, J. E. Wideman claims that Malcolm X's story in essence is

> the struggle of the formerly enslaved, the colonized, the outcast, the dispossessed to seize responsibility, to forge personal identity and communal consciousness that will reverse centuries of subjugation, self-hate; a consciousness capable of opening doors through which healing, healthy people might walk unbowed. (qtd. in Guzzio 24)

In addition to challenging the widespread racial injustices permeating his community, Malcolm X's autobiography challenges the prejudiced communal views on spirituality within such a politically unjust society. Thus, in studying the relation between spirituality and the individual in particular, this thesis examines how both autobiographies – through asserting the authors' individuality – contest popular views on religion prevailing in their societies. Both writers criticize their societies' perception of Islam: al-Ghazali specifically dismisses a notion of religion that is based on imitation and the mere following of religious authorities, while Malcolm X discredits any religious views that either propagate racist notions themselves or render individuals passive in confronting them.

Both works reject the cultural authority imposed by certain collective religious views. They expose their societies' often misinterpretations of religion emphasizing both its liberating force and the importance of individual pursuit toward discovering truth and oneself. Their focus on self-understanding is parallel to their quest for religious truth regardless of other worldly interests or popular views surrounding them:

> Rarely do you see a person who uses religion because of the love [one] feels toward [one's] being and the superior creation, or as a tool to free [oneself] from attachments, desires, and mental blockages. Rarely do you see religion as being used to liberate oneself. Religion is, most importantly, supposed to be a tool to learn about self . . . religion in its deepest and truest form is nothing more than a tool for an individual to become knowledgeable of him- or herself, and to become liberated. (Rad 75)

Thus, it is by pursuing true knowledge of their religion based on individual examination, regardless of their communities' approaches to spirituality that both writers better learn about themselves.

Such a goal is best realized through their choice of the literary genre of autobiography as a medium to communicate their experiences. It allows both writers to further assert their individualities against what they regard as misconceptions of religious ideas promoted in their societies. On the one hand, they narrate the journeys they undertake following their misguided past endeavors to gain spiritual knowledge amid social hardships, and on the other hand, their continual efforts to rectify such a past through the individual investigation of truth rather than merely following a certain group. By sharing their spiritual experiences with their readers, both works do not merely refute what they consider misconceptions of religion, but offer more profoundly spiritual models to be followed by their societies. In other words, both writers are motivated by their conviction that their own individual experiences could serve as models for readers toward achieving spiritual fulfillment rather than the forms of spirituality that their societies propagate, or even often impose. They specifically criticize the collective forms of spirituality that incite narrow-minded perspective, indiscriminate imitation, or intolerant attitudes toward other members of the society.

The development of both works and their portrayal of the authors' life experiences resonate with the definition that Jerome Buckley proposes for the genre of autobiography being "a life journey confused by frequent misdirection and even crisis of identity but reaching at last a sense of perspective and integration . . . a satisfying wholeness" (qtd. in Gordon 107). Similarly, both al-Ghazali and Malcolm X relate their personal life journeys with all the transitions that take place in them

until they attain self-discovery and spiritual enlightenment in their life paths and attempt to make their readers share such journeys with them.

Chapter 1: Towards Individual Inquiry
in al-Ghazali's *Deliverance from Error*

> I have constantly been diving daringly into the depths of
> this profound sea and wading into its deep water like a
> bold man, not like a cautious coward. I would penetrate
> far into every murky mystery, pounce upon every
> problem, and dash into every mazy difficulty.
>
> (al-Ghazali, *Deliverance* 54 [62][4])

As a significant constituent of first-person narratives in medieval times, spiritual autobiographies formed a rich and vibrant tradition whose significant influence not only affected the genre of autobiography but also helped define its development in later stages. Focusing on the writers' spiritual experiences, which often delineated their crises of skepticism and their subsequent quests for reconciliation with their religious beliefs, such spiritual narratives invited readers to delve deeper into the writers' intellectual and psychological concerns.

Such narratives do not only inform readers about the individual life stories and experiences the authors have, but also provide a clearer image of the conceptions of individuality and selfhood dominant in those writers' societies at large. Hence, for example, in composing his *Confessions*,[5] a landmark of the genre in the Western tradition, we learn how Saint Augustine's "epistemological uncertainty" and subsequent search for spiritual resolution based on "intellectual honesty, integrity, and courage" (Barbour, *Versions* 12) lead him to undergo a dramatic transformation from a life of sin and pride into one of piety and submission. While he chooses to individually search for religious knowledge instead of leading a life of sensuality and insincerity as his father and other members of the society did, readers not only learn about the author's significant life story but are also given access to a better understanding of how the surrounding society perceives the relation between spirituality and selfhood.

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Similarly, such a tradition of spiritual narratives also flourished in medieval Islamic autobiographical writing. Although exposed to several influences including Arabic, Greek, and Persian (see von Grunebaum 261-62; Reynolds, "A Thousand Years" 45), the early fully-developed models of religious narratives at the time were those specifically recounting the Sufi[6] mystics' visions and spiritual experiences (Aikman 739). Frank Rosenthal considers the autobiographical writings of al-Muhasibi[7] and al-Tirmidhi[8] during the ninth century as the early origins of such narratives since the authors' journeys of spiritual development and transformation are highlighted in them (qtd. in Reynolds, "A Thousand Years" 47).

However, one of the most notable and widely acclaimed spiritual narratives in medieval Islamic literature and whose influence could be traced in later writings of the tradition – such as those of al-Simnani[9] and Ibn 'Ajiba[10] (Griffel 75; Jones 126) – is al-Ghazali's *Deliverance from Error*. In this seminal work, al-Ghazali delineates his spiritual crisis ensuing from the turbulent contemporary religious-intellectual milieu which leads him to undergo physical and spiritual journeys towards self-knowledge and spiritual reconciliation. Such reconciliation marks his attempt to resolve the differences prevailing among the sound, yet often divergent, religious views at the time through individual academic study and open-minded research dismissing what he concludes as logically inconsistent or merely imitative knowledge. This chapter seeks to examine how, in doing so, al-Ghazali contests the authority of some popular views on religion upheld in his society over freedom of thought, and asserts the role of independent, individual inquiry instead.

Born in the Persian city of Tus during the early mid-eleventh century, Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali witnessed a heated political, religious, and intellectual setting. Firstly, the political situation of Islamdom[11] at the time was one of

"disintegration" where the sovereignty of the Abbasid Caliphate[12] was being challenged by the Fatimids[13] and the Almoravids[14] in the West, and the Byzantines[15] and Seljuks[16] in the East, thus the Islamic world was in reality ruled by several clashing "local 'governments'" instead of a unified political power (Musleh 32). The Sunni Seljuks imposed their sovereignty over Persia at the time and had the Nizari Ismaili Shiites of the Fatimid rule, known as the Batiniyyah,[17] as their sworn enemies. The latter were determined to "put down the whole Seljuk rule" as they fought several key Seljuk figures, who also happened to be of considerable influence on the intellectual scene (40). A significant example of that is the assassination of Nizam al-Mulk,[18] key Seljuk vizier and patron, in 1092 and whose death was considered a huge loss for the Sunni scholars at the time (41).

Secondly, such a turbulent political scene inevitably had a significant effect on the religious and intellectual life in medieval Persia at the time and by extension on al-Ghazali's own life. Having excelled at his theological studies in Nishapur under his instructor al-Juwayni[19] – a prominent Islamic theologian and jurist whose advocating of critical, unbiased research influenced al-Ghazali's early research methodologies – al-Ghazali was himself recognized by Nizam al-Mulk and, consequently, appointed as head of the prestigious Nizamiyyah school[20] of Baghdad in 1091, a year before the latter's death.

Therefore, although the "intellectual productivity" and cultural richness was, paradoxically, flourishing in medieval Persia, the heated – at times even hostile – intellectual disputes among the different schools of thought were easily noticeable in their attachments to politics (Musleh 64). Scholars of the Shiite Batiniyyah, the Sunni Ash'ari,[21] the mystical Sufis, the philosophers, among others, often uncritically

attacked one another's thoughts in sheer blind adherence to their predecessors or intolerant defense of their views (al-Ghazali, *Deliverance* 76 [98]).

As al-Ghazali admits in his autobiography, such an unhealthy, intellectual climate affected the medieval theologian himself where he, too, suspects the sincerity of his academic endeavors at times:

> I reflected on my intention in my public teaching, and I saw that it was not directed purely to God, but rather was instigated and motivated by the quest for fame and widespread prestige. So I became certain that I was on the brink of a crumbling bank and already on the verge of falling into the Fire, unless I set about mending my ways. (79 [103])

This troubled psychological state only introduces the scholar to a severe spiritual crisis caused by the polarized milieu where minimal space was left for the true understanding of the self or its surroundings. Al-Ghazali's spiritual skepticism, thus, was only a natural outcome of the unstable circumstances he witnessed in the society (al-Fayumi 102). Consequently, in retaliation against such social and intellectual pressures, and to the surprise of his peers, al-Ghazali relinquished his position in the Nizamiyyah.

Although the medieval scholar was aware of the conflict between the authority of tradition versus the autonomy of the individual in his society, his concern for individual, independent search as a crucial step in bringing about real transformation and development of the self reaffirms his decisions (Moosa 256). Hence, al-Ghazali does not succumb to the hegemonic domination of such schools of thought and chooses to undertake an individual quest for truth, however significant the sacrifices and changes in his life would be. He was determined to embark on a personal journey seeking spiritual peace and self-discovery.

Leaving Baghdad behind, together with his established career there, he heads to Mecca and Damascus in search of spiritual reconciliation for his restless soul. On

both physical and spiritual journeys, al-Ghazali specifically sets out hoping to realize "certain," truthful religious knowledge that could not be debated or refuted by any of the other religious sects and schools. He pursues knowledge "that no doubt clings to it, nor is it accompanied by the possibility of error or deception, nor can the mind even suppose such a possibility" (al-Ghazali, *Deliverance* 55 [64]). Explaining the scholar's aim further, Marshall G. S. Hodgson states that the knowledge the writer seeks is one that would enable him to "perceive the ultimate truth, in however slight a measure, in the same way the prophets perceived it" (187). Unwavering spiritual certainty, therefore, is what al-Ghazali was searching for, one that could stand in solid defiance against the claims of other religious views as well as his own skepticism.

Therefore, it is in recounting his religious anxieties and deep spiritual insecurities during such a crisis and his later journeys towards salvation that his *Deliverance from Error* is considered a remarkable autobiographical narrative of the scholar's individual spiritual experience as well as an enlightening document on the medieval Persian context in general and the society's notions of selfhood in relation to spirituality in particular. Thus, several critics and theorists have highlighted the significance of al-Ghazali's work, acknowledging its influential contribution to the development of the tradition of pre-modern Arabic autobiographical writings. Others, however, question the autobiographical quality of the work in the first place.

Although many debates have focused on whether or not writings of this nature should be considered autobiographical works in the modern sense, Dwight F. Reynolds dismisses such a suspicion as being an outcome of imposing modern Western views of the genre on autobiographical writings belonging to different historical and cultural contexts ("A Thousand Years" 19); he further declares that

> [t]he most inevitable result is that, other, particularly nonwestern,
> forms of autobiography are discounted as immature and

underdeveloped, as pale shadows of the "real" or "true" autobiography known only in the modern West, and therefore as literary productions clearly not born of the same sense of individual identity. (19)

Reynolds proposes that theorists often make a mistake when they apply the features and characteristics of structure, rhetorical devices, chronology, and narrative techniques inherent in modern Western autobiographical models to "measure the level of 'self-consciousness' and 'individual identity'" of other autobiographical narratives of different traditions (19). Moreover, in specifically exploring the notions of "individualism" and "self-awareness" represented in pre-modern Arabic narratives, Reynolds states that much of the personal side of the author could be explored – unlike previous claims suggesting pre-modern authors relying heavily on their intellectual or academic experiences rather than on their individuality – through both a careful rendering of the text as well as "a thorough awareness of their social milieus and literary strategies" (30). Therefore, upon examining al-Ghazali's autobiography, the reader is invited to carefully read through the narrative and appreciate its literary specificity bearing in mind the social, political, and intellectual statuses of his surrounding society at that moment in order to appreciate his assertion of his selfhood in the work.

Hence, although a considerable part of his narrative is devoted to the evaluation, support, or refutation of the assumptions upheld by the different schools, the work should not, nevertheless, be regarded as a mere academic document lacking significant autobiographical features. In fact, al-Ghazali begins the work in the form of a response that he gives to a question previously addressed to him to elaborate on his spiritual endeavors: "*Now then*: You have asked me, my brother in religion, to communicate to you the aim and secrets of the sciences and the dangerous and intricate depths of the different doctrines and views" (53 [60]; italics in translation). In

doing so, al-Ghazali deliberately makes the autobiographical nature of his document clearly recognizable to his readers through the very introductory sentences of the work. Such a beginning is especially significant as it makes clear the author's motivation for composing his narrative as well as fulfills an intrinsic feature of autobiographical writings as declared by Philippe Lejeune, namely the "autobiographical pact," through which readers understand that first-person attributes present in the text in fact refer to the author of the work (Smith and Watson 207). Not only does al-Ghazali's introduction support Reynolds' views on the literary nature of non-Western autobiographies, but also the rest of the text in which he delineates his journeys of spiritual investigation.

Al-Ghazali proceeds by precisely highlighting the major influence that free, individual inquiry had on his pursuit towards resolving spiritual unsureness; addressing the inquisitor, he states:

> You want me to give you an account of my travail in disengaging the truth from amid the welter of the sects, despite the polarity of their means and methods. You also want to hear about my daring in mounting from the lowland of servile conformism to the highland of independent investigation. (53 [60])

The medieval writer, thus, sets the two attitudes of contemporary scholars far apart: the mere following of a group, on the one hand, and the individual effort in pursuing truth, on the other. He considers the former as a kind of "servile conformism" to the authority of certain individuals of religious rank or certain religious views that are winning ground in society regardless of their academic merit, a conformism that denotes the absence of free inquiry in one's spiritual endeavors. In contrast, he regards the "independent investigation" of religious matters as the path towards resolving one's skeptical views spurred by the clashing claims of the various currents of thought at the time.

Thus, the very start of the medieval scholar's autobiography is clearly a bold statement against the religious views that are based on uncritical imitation, and a veneration of impartial, individual inquiry. Quoting Imam Ali,[22] "[d]o not know the truth by men, but rather, know the truth and you will know its adherents" (*Deliverance* 68 [87]), al-Ghazali rebukes other sects whose spiritual views are defined merely by the "uncritical acceptance of the Imam's [a religious leader] pronouncements" (53 [60]). The writer's assertion of his individuality, hence, is particularly highlighted through his dynamic interaction with – and not simple imitation of – society, in this case contesting its prevalent attitudes in adopting religious views. In other words, the absence of such a context could have probably denied the writer the chance to undergo such an experience in the first place, or at least in this specific way. Such an interaction is integral to Paul Eakin's examination of the relation between the individual and the surrounding context where he emphasizes "the extent to which the self and its story in the lives we live and write are deeply embedded in culture" (*Touching the World* 71).

Exploring the influence of such vibrant, yet oppositional, intellectual currents through which the medieval scholar lived, William M. Watt explains how the scholar-jurists at the time were considered "the main bearers of the ideational system" but whose subservience to the ruling system, however, negatively affected their credibility amongst the masses who, consequently, turned to mysticism as an alternative to "official religion" (180). Nevertheless, a scholar-jurist himself, al-Ghazali was not free from such a spiritual conflict. Consequently, in his autobiography, the writer sets out to meticulously analyze each of the four popular approaches to religion at the time: scholastic theology, Batiniyyah, philosophy, and Sufism.

Highlighting his independent, individual inquiry during such a process and refusing the authority of external agents to avoid any possibilities for bias in his research, he states: "I knew, of course, that undertaking to refute their [the philosophers'] doctrine before comprehending it and knowing it in depth would be a shot in the dark. So I girded myself for the task of learning that science [philosophy] by the mere perusal of their writings without seeking help of a master and teacher" (61 [74]). Following such a scrutiny in studying the different religious sciences and which takes up most of the narrative's space, the writer disapproves of the first three approaches as representatives of biased research, mere imitation, and incoherence respectively. On the other hand, however, he commends Sufism which invites him to seek pure spiritual knowledge inwards rather than get lost in endless disputes among the different schools, hence asserting his solid individuality within a fragmented society.

In fact, as he often asserts in his autobiography, it is through the mystical ways of Sufism that his spiritual crisis is resolved. His belief in the genuine religious knowledge that Sufism provides leads him to emphasize later: "I knew with certainty that the Sufis are those who uniquely follow the way to God Most High, their mode of life is the best of all, their way the most direct of ways, and their ethic the purest" (81 [106]). So what did al-Ghazali value in Sufism that he thought other religious schools lacked at the time?

The appreciation of the individual and his unique experiences is central to Sufi thought. It positions man in a "lofty rank" where his heart – rather than esoteric, ideational forms of religion – is the dwelling of pure spiritual knowledge (Schimmel 189). Sufi mystics view man's heart as "the mirror into which God reflects Himself" (190). Therefore, after experiencing agonizing feelings of spiritual skepticism and

growing frustration in the dominant contemporary religious milieu, al-Ghazali seeks refuge in Sufism's recognition of one's individuality as a guide towards realizing a spirituality untarnished by other influences and biases of the outer world, thus in essence, a liberating force towards self-assertion.

Although the writer initially believes that certain spiritual knowledge could only be verified by the senses and the intellect, he eventually loses faith in both, especially the former, when he realizes their often delusive nature. Relating how an eye – "the strongest of the senses" – could get deceived by the indiscernible movement of shadows and how the world of dreams could challenge the rational calculations of the intellect (*Deliverance* 56-57 [66-67]), al-Ghazali highlights his desperate yearning for more incontestable religious certitude. In studying the process in which al-Ghazali arrives at what he regards as satisfying truthful knowledge, Sulayman Dunya highlights the disillusionment of the medieval philosopher with such misleading sensory knowledge and recognizes it as a significant stage within the author's journey of individual investigation that would pave the way for his subsequent spiritual and intellectual endeavors (27-28). Thus, after arduous physical and spiritual journeys along the course of two years, the troubled scholar is eventually relieved by "a light which God Most High cast into [his] breast. And that light is the key to most knowledge" after which he regains his trust in "self-evident data of reason" (*Deliverance* 57 [67-68]). Al-Ghazali's perception of "light" has indeed bemused scholars since then who offer several interpretations of the term (Urjun 59; McCarthy 105). However, as an advocate of thoughtful, individual academic inquiry, the term might not merely refer to ambiguous, arbitrarily bestowed divine grace, but, more profoundly, a trust in an intellectual practice that gives access to truthful, irrefutable spiritual knowledge.

Thus, as Georg Misch higlights Plato's views on the stages of spiritual development and their influence on autobiography, al-Ghazali's approach could be regarded in light of the Platonic notion of "the realm of Ideas"[23] or the divine order (107-08) and understood through Misch's interpretation of the term:

> As a method of reasoning, . . . Platonic dialectic is a means of transcending the limits of the intellect by its own intuitive power . . . At the end of the *toilsome methodical ascent* through the realm of ideas the god-related nature of the soul breaks out in a full experience and, leaving dialectic far behind it, in *a sudden act of revelation* gets into direct contact with the highest Idea, the idea of the Good as Plato called it, from which the spiritual realm . . . derives its unity. (109; my italics)

Hence, al-Ghazali's experience of resolving his skeptical notions on religion should not be understood apart from his strenuous, inquisitive endeavors in his refusal to seek a knowledge that is based on the mere following or imitation of popular views in his surrounding culture (Basil 30-31). His seemingly "sudden" relief is not entirely surprising to his readers who understand the exhausting stages of spiritual development he goes through in which such a "revelation" is only a natural outcome of his continuous search for truthful knowledge. However, instead of a Platonic dialectic, al-Ghazali trusts the mystic Sufi practices as "the means of polishing and purifying this organ [mind] of our spiritual vision, giving certitude to human understanding" (Goodman 150).

Moreover, al-Ghazali's fascination with Sufism was not to be a superficial one. He rather emphasizes his need for practical experience of Sufi ways in order to fully undergo the transformation it promises:

> I knew with certainty that the sufis were masters of states, not purveyors of words, and that I had learned all I could by way of theory. There remained, then, only what was attainable, not by hearing and study, but by fruitional experience and actually engaging in the way. (*Deliverance* 78 [102])

His sincere inquiry into enlightening spiritual knowledge is enhanced by a further empirical approach to attain such knowledge, by a "fruitional experience," which he later declares is "comparable to actual seeing and handling" (*Deliverance* 86 [114]). His appreciation of and ultimate trust in individual inquiry and its role in relieving his skeptical spiritual worries thus encourages him to engage in Sufi practices rather than blindly follow its teachings, the attitude he fiercely opposes from the onset of his journeys.

However, in commending Sufi ways, al-Ghazali was nevertheless cautious not to get swayed by uncritical and biased enthusiasm for one religious school, in particular, and dismiss other views, which would then still endanger his genuine pursuit of a coherent, impartial, and truthful view of religion. Despite its potential to resolve his spiritual skepticism, thereby assuring his unique individuality, extremist Sufi views and interpretations of selfhood and individual autonomy raised the concerns of a considerable body of scholars at the time, including al-Ghazali, regarding the orthodoxy of the religion. In examining such concerns during the time, Hodgson explains:

> the Sufi, for all his special graces, must not imagine himself exempt
> from the common human obligations of the Shariʿah. The inward
> spirit (the batin) [the inner/esoteric] must not be allowed to displace
> the outer law and doctrine (the zahir) [the outer/exoteric]. (188)

Thus, although al-Ghazali notes the appreciation of individual inquiry celebrated in Sufi thought, the principal drive behind his transformative journey of self-discovery was his attempt to reconcile the different religious schools and views of the time from which truth could be derived, at least partially.

This leads him to emphasize the equal importance of orthodox theology in attaining a unified spiritual wholeness since "[e]ven the spiritual world . . . is dark and shadowy, without the Qur'an to light it up – the Qur'an, God's veritable Word, here

plays the role of the Aristotelian Active Intellect, rendering idea intelligible as sunlight renders bodies visible" (Goodman 150). Therefore, the most noted contribution of al-Ghazali to medieval spirituality is his significant attempts to bridge the widening schism between the two polarizing attitudes towards religion: orthodox scholasticism and mysticism (Watt 180; Macdonald 72; Schimmel 259). Through laborious individual investigation, such a contribution attests to the writer's continuous striving for self-assertion within his society and culture.

Al-Ghazali even situates his Sufi views, which emphasize individuality and selfhood, within the larger framework of orthodox teachings. He argues that the latter too significantly invites the individual to search inwards for truthful spiritual knowledge. In his voluminous work *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* (1096) – written in Damascus during his self-exploratory spiritual quest – al-Ghazali discusses several issues on theology, philosophy, and Sufism. In his Persian abridged version of the book, *Kimiya-e Saadat* (*The Alchemy of Happiness*), he asserts that the path to spiritual fulfillment is to be sought initially through knowledge of the self:

> Knowledge of self is the key to the knowledge of God, according to the saying [prophetic tradition][24] "He who knows himself knows God", and, as it is written in the Qur'an, "Soon will We show them Our signs in the (furthest) region (of the earth) and in *themselves*, until it becomes manifest to them that this is the Truth . . ." (Qur'an 41:53). Now nothing is nearer to you than yourself, and if you know not yourself how can you know anything else? (*Kimiya* 3; italics in translation)

Thus, delving deep into one's self – as prescribed here by the orthodox religious streams: the Quran and the prophetic tradition – is essentially what al-Ghazali seeks in Sufism. Such an understanding of the self necessarily involves the assertion of one's individuality (*Kimiya* 5) and independent inquiry of truth, avoiding any pre-conceptual "dogmatic prejudice" that would affect one's quest for truth which, in essence, is regarded as the "highest function of the soul" (*Kimiya* 12-13).

Thus, throughout his spiritual journey, al-Ghazali aims to free himself from the limited religious approaches celebrated in his society, which, in advocating a certain school of thought, often tend to marginalize others. As once influenced by his early mentor's – al-Juwayni's – unbiased, analytical methods in examining different currents of thought, al-Ghazali proposes a more reconciliatory approach to the different religious currents of thought at the time, recognizing the merit in each, hence his significance in the religious-intellectual scene at the time (Nuwaylati 16). Emphasizing the essential role of sustained individual inquiry as the basis of spiritual knowledge and certitude, al-Ghazali's autobiography significantly challenges the authority that society sometimes imposes on spiritual views. Likewise, another significant narrative – even though belonging to different spatial, temporal, and cultural contexts – that similarly highlights the role of individual inquiry in discerning truthful, unbiased spiritual knowledge by relating the physical and spiritual journeys that the author undergoes in search of spiritual reconciliation and self-discovery is Malcolm X's autobiography. A contemporary African American political activist who undergoes a remarkable series of transformations throughout a short life span, Malcolm X's spiritual quests are principally grounded in his fight for racial and political equality within his society.

Chapter 2: Reconstructing the Self
in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

> I'm for truth, no matter who tells it. I'm for justice, no
> matter who it is for or against. I'm a human being first
> and foremost, and as such I'm for whoever and whatever
> benefits humanity *as a whole*.
>   (Malcolm X 373, italics in original)

Asserting one's human right to free existence – the quest for discovering one's own self and articulating its struggle towards self-liberation – has strong roots in early African American autobiographical narratives. Writers narrated the cruelty they suffered at the hands of the European colonialists who kidnapped African natives from their homelands and relocated them as slaves in the newly discovered territories of the "New World." Spiritual slave narratives, in particular, offered a refuge for the writers from their cruel reality in bondage where an assertion of the freedom of their spirit was an act of resistance against the slavery they experienced. Olaudah Equiano,[25] Frederick Douglass,[26] John Marrant,[27] Jarena Lee,[28] and Sojourner Truth,[29] among others, are all iconic figures of the genre during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The severe hardships which the writers encounter in slavery and their attempts to construct an alternative meaningful world – especially through an emphasis on the liberating forces of literacy and spirituality – instead of their current, harsh reality lead them to question their very existence in the first place. Hence, they would often delineate their experiences of suffering, sin, and degradation along their life journeys, which end in their conversion to a religious life of preaching (Pratt 169). Religion offered them a sensible view of their existence and assured them of their equal rights as human beings, promising them a salvation from their agonizing reality of

enslavement. Thus, they narrate their spiritual journeys alongside their journeys for freedom and liberation, each complementing the other.

In his book *To Tell a Free Story*, William L. Andrews argues that the genre of autobiography principally existed for early African Americans to "talk about freedom as a theme and goal of life" (xi). He states that:

> In black spiritual autobiography the protagonist wishes to escape sinfulness and ignorance in order to achieve righteousness and a knowledge of the saving grace of God. In the slave narrative the quest is toward freedom from physical bondage and the enlightenment that literacy can offer to the restricted self and social consciousness of the slave. (7)

Such a rich heritage of autobiographical writings – and specifically spiritual ones – can be traced clearly later through *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Belonging to a prominent revolutionary African American voice of the twentieth century, not only is Malcolm X's account of his journey towards discovering and liberating himself significant, but his attempt to write an autobiography is in itself also an act of self-assertion within a society torn apart by communal racial injustices.

Although issued in 1863 during the American Civil War[30] and in spite of its official enforcement in 1865, the Emancipation Proclamation[31] failed to resolve the racial problem inherent in American society at the time, besides denying African Americans their equal rights to citizenship. Following the Reconstruction,[32] the African American community was split between two attitudes towards claiming their human and civil rights for freedom and equality, one further advocating abolitionist efforts and another stressing self-development in general as an initial step to liberation (Wintz 1).

In retaliation to such a frustratingly unsettled political situation, several movements emerged clearly demanding the rights of the African American

community to equal citizenship and emphasizing their identity within society, such as the Universal Negro Improvement Association[33] (1914). However, such attempts were reciprocally confronted by racist views claiming white supremacy. Some even evolved into organized hate groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan,[34] that aimed at terrorizing any emerging voices advocating racial equality or asserting African American identity (Uffelman 38). Hence, such a turbulent political scene necessarily affected African American views on spirituality as well.

The African American religious tradition is a remarkable one in American society, whose richness could not be reduced to specific, unique characteristics (Ware 191-92). Displaced from its African roots and introduced to a predominantly European culture, African American spirituality drew on different traditions, thus eventually developing a hybridity of its own, however not without tensions and conflicts within such a body of diverse spiritual views. The most significant religious influence intrinsic to the political situation is the Christian attitude towards race at the time.

The African American could not escape the idea of "the Christianity of the slave owner" and a preacher who manipulates religious discourse to promote racial supremacy in favor of his master (Wilmore 123-24). It is not just the representation of the slave master, but also the representation of a divine creator himself being white for most Western Christians, thus rendering the religion as "unmistakably a white religion" (124). Hence, the religious-political context that Malcolm X grew within was one of turbulence, offering minimal space for free and independent approaches to spiritual knowledge.

Throughout the work, Malcolm X relates his relentless efforts in his quest for freedom, a quest that initially seems to originate from political drives – to obtain

equal rights for his fellow African Americans – but which leads to another spiritual journey. Hence, as his religious beliefs change and evolve throughout the course of his life – often in opposition to his society's racism – and subsequently influence his actions, it is his passionate yearning for freedom and self-liberation that continues to spur such frequent changes in his convictions. Therefore, this chapter seeks to examine how Malcolm X's autobiography subverts popular politically driven religious notions of the time while asserting the role of free, unbiased inquiry that rejects the different forms of racism and suppression imposed by society in attaining reliable spiritual knowledge.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X – which was actually documented by the celebrated African American writer and journalist Alex Haley[35] as told to him by Malcolm X during several conversations and interviews over the span of two years (1963-1965) and published posthumously in 1965 – presents the events of Malcolm X's life in a chronological order that allows the reader to trace the development of his experiences during each stage. This autobiography, unlike al-Ghazali's, offers the reader a much more intricately detailed account of the author's personal life experiences. Whether they are colorful portrayals of outfits he wears during dancing parties, dramatic descriptions of fear, happiness, or depression, or more communal historic incidents and national events taking place at the time that the work presents, Malcolm X's narrative is clearly different from al-Ghazali's which devotes most of its volume to the examination of several medieval schools of thought with much less details than the former's vivid portrayals of himself and the American society.

Such an obvious distinction resonates with each of the two figures' approach towards recounting their experiences to the audience and which they pronounce clearly in their texts. Hence, al-Ghazali introduces his narrative as one that responds

to a "brother in religion" (*Deliverance* 53 [60]) inquiring about the author's pursuits and decisions regarding spiritual knowledge. He orients his readers to the autobiographical nature of his work – namely, one that focuses more on academic inquiry rather than personal details – which he assumes conveniently allows him to communicate his personal spiritual experiences to the audience. On the other hand, Malcolm X discloses the rationale behind his choice to recount more elements of his personal life:

> [P]eople are always speculating – why am I as I am? To understand that of any person, his whole life, from birth, must be reviewed. All of our experiences fuse into our personality. Everything that ever happened to us is an ingredient. (153)

Hence, Malcolm X believes that it is in presenting to his readers such elaborate portrayals of himself and his society that he could best convey his journeys in search of spiritual contentment. For example, when he relates the experience of being recruited in the army following the Second World War, the author not only orients the reader to what his society at large was going through then, but also conveys his personal attitude and feelings towards such events. Thus while admitting in the army's application form that he refuses to join as he objects to the war in the first place, and how antagonistic the officials were towards that stance, he also shows his readers the reason behind such a position:

> They asked me if I knew what "conscientious objector" meant. I told them that when the white man asked me to go off somewhere and fight and maybe die to preserve the way the white man treated the black man in America, then my conscience made me object. (207)

Therefore, by narrating such incidents in detail, Malcolm X aims to subvert certain political – as well as racial – views present in his society and which he regards as clearly unjust. In other words, the writer constructs a world of his own individual experiences within the parameters of the larger one in which he lives. Thus, in light of Paul Eakin's view of the interrelatedness of both the personal and the communal,

Malcolm X's narrative allows him to better understand himself in relation to the outer world, consequently, asserting his individuality within society.

Thus, as a significant model of Western autobiographical writings that celebrate the self-representation and individualism inherent in the genre, Malcolm X's voluminous narrative is abundant with similar intricate personal details encompassing all stages of his constantly changing life which at the same time serve as a commentary on the communal as well. In describing the different forms of racial discrimination he is exposed to as a child, adolescent, and a young man, and how he retaliates against them, the reader learns about both the author and his society more closely. Recalling as a child when the state welfare agency would threaten his mother of taking her children into custody for being financially incapable of raising them by herself, Malcolm X claims:

> I truly believe that if ever a state social agency destroyed a family, it destroyed us. We wanted and tried to stay together. Our home didn't have to be destroyed. . . .And knowing that my mother in there [state welfare documents] was a statistic that didn't have to be, that existed because of a society's failure, hypocrisy, greed, and lack of mercy and compassion. Hence, I have no mercy or compassion in me for a society that will crush people, and then penalize them for not being able to stand up under the weight. (22)

Such a condemnation that the author pronounces against his community's unjust practices enables him to contest and counteract its power as well as defend his selfhood.

Similar incidents throughout the narrative are especially important to serve the author's ends both in reflecting the plight of African Americans as well as constructing a corresponding world based on the author's narration where new space is created for self-expression that is otherwise suppressed in real life. In recalling and documenting the names of several "white" people whose negative impact on him as a child and young man had severe repercussions on his later life, Malcolm X tactfully

employs his narrative to rebel against the injustices that he was unable to respond to earlier. When he mentions the "white" child who stole his money from him when he was young by cheating him (16), the author lets his work avenge him against someone who mistreated him in the past and whom he was unable to overcome at the time. The narrative thus becomes a means of retaliation against unjust situations in society, announcing the individual as the ultimate authority on his life; it is the individual who can shape his existence even through a personal testimony that holds the unjust society accountable as long as readers from different historical and cultural contexts continue to examine his work.

The significance of the work, therefore, lies in being both a literary account chronicling its protagonist's remarkable life journey as well as an enlightening historical document that portrays several political, economic, and social facets of contemporary American society. Offering a significant representation of the individual and society, the work is "undoubtedly one of the most memorable American autobiographies and a book that continues to shape American perspectives on race" (Scrimgeour 138). This could be clearly noted in light of Malcolm X's elaborate depiction of his own experiences as an African American who was privileged to gain insight into and even experience the different lifestyles adopted by his fellow African Americans which ranged from underdeveloped ghettos to the extravagant city life. The influence of his rhetoric on African Americans and the society at large extended from Harlem with small numbers of addicts who wished to get better lives (266) to the nation's finest universities with an audience measured in thousands (43).

Moreover, further to Eakin's view mentioned earlier, as the work unfolds the character of its author within broader society, a certain feature inherent to

autobiographical works is highlighted in the narrative, one that Roy Pascal similarly

applauds in autobiographical writings in general:

> This is the decisive achievement of the art of autobiography: to give
> us events that are symbolic or the personality as an entity unfolding
> not solely according to its own laws, but also in response to the
> world it lives in. Through them both the writers and readers know
> life. (185)

More specifically, and to stress the inextricable bond between the individual and his

surroundings further, Lindon Barrett emphatically claims that "the foremost concern

of African American autobiographies has been the relation between the individual and

the communal" (105). Thus, the significance of the genre of autobiography to African

American literature lies in allowing the individual to announce a sense of the freedom

he misses in reality to assert his individuality in relation to the community, whether

his fellow African Americans who share his plight, or the oppressor who denies his

rights. Malcolm X's narrative, thus, significantly illustrates such a relationship by

relating the hardships which the author and his people experience throughout their

lives merely because of their skin color. In doing so, the author primarily gives voice

to the other voiceless members of his community as well as holds the agents of racial

discrimination, whether "white" or "black," guilty of such prejudices.

Moreover, when examining his autobiography, Malcolm X should not only be

viewed as a political revolutionary figure in African American history and for being a

remarkable activist whose powerful calls for freedom greatly influenced his people's

self-esteem against a racist society (Howard-Pitney 10), but is also a significant

spiritual figure of the time. His several spiritual transformations presented throughout

the autobiography attest to his constant quest for genuine spiritual knowledge. He

starts off being an uninterested Christian as a child who "had very little respect for

most people who represented religion" (5) and then is referred to as "Satan" when he

enters prison denoting his absolute rejection of any religious notions (156). However, after being introduced to the NOI later in prison and becoming a fervent minister advocating its teachings among his fellow African Americans, by the end of his short life, he denounces that too and resorts to orthodox Islam. Although some readers could view such continuous and radical changes of the author's beliefs as features of hastiness, unsureness, or inconsistency in his character (Wainstock 138; Perry 175), it is his constant quest for genuine spiritual knowledge that drives him to embrace such diverse approaches and attitudes to religion which are spurred each time by his passionate yearning for racial equality and liberation.

Similarly, his thirst for gaining such knowledge is what had probably led his early African American predecessors to write their own spiritual narratives as well, a thirst stimulated by the earnest quest for freedom, self-discovery, and asserting one's individuality in their societies. Thus, regarding his change of views as a source of admiration rather than rebuke, Emmanuel Nelson notes that

> [i]n the pages of the autobiography Malcolm X emerges as a fascinating and complex figure: immensely insightful yet at times oddly naïve; often fearless but sometimes deeply vulnerable; apparently dogmatic and very sure of his beliefs yet surprisingly willing to learn, reassess, and change his views. (247)

Hence, every time Malcolm X changes his views on religion, he recounts to his readers why and how that takes place. For example, when he joins the NOI, we are informed that this is based on his hatred of the "white man" who is referred to as the devil (162). However, he does not hesitate to reassess such a racist idea later when he is introduced to orthodox Islam which holds all people equal. This bold, unhesitating willingness to pursue the truth of things – despite the often radical transformations he experiences while embracing different beliefs and ideologies triggered by his passionate quest for freedom – highlights Malcolm X's unfaltering attempts to

reconcile different spiritual views he adopts throughout his life by undergoing transformative physical and spiritual journeys towards self-discovery and understanding. Such transformations are presented in the narrative where the author does not merely imitate or passively follow the popular religious views prevalent in society at the time and which propagated one form of racism or another, but Malcolm X rather insists on critically analyzing each of them, deciding, through independent investigation, which to accept. He refuses all forms of spirituality that are based on racial bias whether propagated by an institution, a group, or an individual.

Malcolm X's early encounter with the African American institutionalized religious tradition is through his father, the Reverend Earl Little,[36] a Baptist minister. Like Malcolm X, Little was a strong advocate for equality and freedom; he particularly defended Marcus Garvey's views on the rights of African Americans to return to their ancestral homelands in Africa (1). Despite his father's firm Christian beliefs and fervent sermons at church, Malcolm X – a young child observing how the "white" and "black" Americans attend different churches based on the color of their skins – has little respect for organized religion represented then in the church as an institution where racial matters are not resolved (Smallwood 28). Such an experience significantly shapes the following episodes of the author's life. It introduces him early on to his race-based society where darker-skinned individuals are indoctrinated to embrace a sense of inferiority in the name of certain religious practices.

Thus, his rejection of this institution is due to its often manipulative discourse that serves racist roles. He thus criticizes the rhetoric of some Christian preaching specifically addressed to African Americans and which indirectly incites them to abandon their rights for equality as American citizens (Baldwin and Al-Hadid 83).

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Condemning this manipulation of religion in one of his speeches, he cynically exclaims:

> It is a miracle that a nation of black people has so fervently continued to believe in a turn-the-other-cheek and heaven-for-you-after-you-die philosophy! It is a *miracle* that the American black people have remained a peaceful people, while catching all the centuries of hell that they have caught, here in white man's heaven! The *miracle* is that the white man's puppet Negro 'leaders,' his preachers and the educated Negroes laden with degrees, and others who have been allowed to wax fat off their black poor brothers, have been able to hold the black masses quiet until now. (251; italics in original)

As Malcolm X once willingly decides to drop out of school, despite being a top student, after his favorite teacher dismisses his dream of becoming a lawyer based on his skin color, asking him to pursue a more "realistic" goal instead, such as carpentry (38), he similarly rejects spirituality that is based on color. Just as dropping out of school is an act of rebellion against an educational institution that forces African Americans to retain a servile mentality in such a race-based society, his disrespect for religious institutions that promote ideals of inequality, subservience, and meekness instead of valuing those of justice, liberation, and dignity is a bold statement against limited and narrow-minded religion.

Second, further to his pursuits for spiritual liberation, Malcolm X denounces religious views imposed by the authority of other individuals, no matter how dear or close they are to him. Later, when introduced to the NOI while in prison,[37] Malcolm X's passionate dedication towards the Nation – as an independent spiritual group which he then assumes represents truthful spiritual knowledge that would offer him physical and spiritual liberation – leads him to expel his own brother, Reginald, a member of the Nation too, once he learns he had committed some violation of the group's strict teachings and rulings (302).

Although greatly regretting this decision later – when he rejects the hegemonic authority of the Nation itself as an equally unjust, biased, racial group – Malcolm X's action towards his brother, however, is a significant incident insofar as it signifies how unwavering the author's adherence to what he believes to be true spiritual knowledge is, regardless of any other considerations. This is noticeably one of the most defining features in Malcolm X's character, which is present throughout the autobiography as it continues to shape his decisions and actions at different junctures of his journey, a journey that continually seeks several means for discovering the self and attaining spiritual satisfaction.

Another individual in whom the young revolutionary places significant trust is Elijah Muhammad,[38] the head figure leading the NOI at the time. After experiencing severe moral degradation based on his incessant endeavors to both integrate in such a race-based society and simultaneously retaliate against its injustices, Malcolm X is put in prison where a major shift takes place in his life's journey. Feeling isolated, alone, and unappreciated, Malcolm X's reception of a letter personally signed by Elijah Muhammad in his cell welcoming him into the "true knowledge" and encouraging him to uplift himself to get out of prison since "the black prisoner . . . symbolized white society's crime of keeping black men oppressed and deprived and ignorant, and unable to get decent jobs, turning them into criminals," had an enormous impact on him then (172). The frustrated prisoner's increasing esteem of him as an enlightened individual and caring mentor leads Malcolm X to fully trust him as an embodiment of true spiritual guidance and liberation from his society's popular race-driven political and spiritual views.

However, after leaving prison and assisting him and the NOI, Malcolm X decides to break away again from his spiritual mentor once he realizes that the latter

betrays and no longer represents the very ideals of freedom and genuine spiritual veracity that he claims to uphold. Therefore, in his perpetual search for liberating spiritual knowledge, the young revolutionary does not hesitate to subvert any authority being exercised either by institutions or individuals, no matter how popular they are within society or how impressed he is with them initially.

Departure from the Nation offered Malcolm X a chance for "spiritual reexamination and renewal" which would prepare him for the subsequent stages of his spiritual development (Marable 309). The noticeable transformation that he undergoes after breaking away and freeing himself from the confining ideology of the NOI is confirmed by his friend Maya Angelou[39] who states that encountering Malcolm X then was like "meeting a man coming out of a lightless cellar and blinking at the day" (qtd. in Goldman 136). Hence, Malcolm X's pursuit of knowledge that guarantees him a true understanding of himself and his existence and ensures him complete freedom from all confinements, whether physical, mental, or spiritual, is clearly noticed as a priority for him above all other considerations or previous convictions.

Besides institutional and individual authorities, Malcolm X refuses to succumb to any concepts or notions that restrict his spiritual pursuits or confine his individuality within society, however appealing they might seem to him at one point in his life. When the disheartened young Malcolm X – who tried to seek his freedom once by being "one of the most depraved parasitical hustlers" (78) and an outlaw, in rebellion against the subservient roles the society expects African Americans to fulfill with minimal protection of the law – finds about the NOI in prison, he is intrigued by its notions.

Advocating black supremacy against the "white" man whose atrocious crimes against African Americans throughout history preserve him a title no less than the

"devil" (162), Malcolm X finds temporary emotional and spiritual comfort in the Nation's teachings. He assumes that the superiority it endows him with for being a dark-skinned person is both physically as well as spiritually liberating as he no longer feels obliged to fit into the confining molds imposed by the unjust political and spiritual ideals of his society.

His resentment of the society's prejudices against him and his people leads him to believe that subverting racist "white" superiority with a counter "black" one is a justified enactment of truth and justice. However, Malcolm X again does not hesitate to fully denounce such an equally racist logic when he experiences a major turning point along his quest for truth that enlightens his vision with a wider global perspective. It occurs when he sets out on a journey that is not only physical, but, more importantly, spiritual as well, one whose influence would eventually allow him to truly discover himself and reconcile his ever-changing spiritual beliefs; that journey is the one to Mecca.

Malcolm X's notions and beliefs change drastically at the very start of his journey to Mecca to perform Hajj.[40] On his way to the holy city, his views about the inherent animosity between "black" and "white" are instantly put into question when he sees fellow pilgrims of different ethnicities and backgrounds warmly greeting each other while meeting at the different airports on their way to Mecca. His quest for truth makes him question whether the color-based notions he was taught during the past years in the NOI, and which fail to justly address the racial issue, are indeed genuine Islamic teachings. He stresses the liberating effect such encounters have on his soul:

> Back at the Frankfurt airport, we took a United Arab Airlines plane on to Cairo. Throngs of people, obviously Muslims from everywhere, bound on the pilgrimage, were hugging and embracing. They were of all complexions, the whole atmosphere was of warmth and friendliness. The feeling hit me that there really wasn't any

color problem here. The effect was as though I had just stepped out
of a prison. (328)

However, the drastic transformation takes place when he sets foot in the city and sees the enormous numbers of people of diverse colors and backgrounds from different nations of the world coming together in genuine brotherhood.

The intense impact such scenes have on Malcolm X's spiritual development is to define the course of his actions afterwards. However, the transformation that this experience brought about in Malcolm X is not entirely a "sudden or melodramatic" one but in reality a culmination of a long series of "trial and error, discovery and disappointment" along the course of his spiritual development (Goldman 136). He thus eventually arrives at the final destination of his short, yet ceaselessly evolving, lifelong journey.

The young fervent activist, whose frustration with the injustices he faced at the hands of his race-based society and who consequently adopted a discourse that once advocated counter-racial hatred, realizes that his true salvation lies in his abiding by the more orthodox teachings of Islam instead of other politically-oriented approaches to religion, despite being socially popular among some groups. He understands that in order to attain true spiritual freedom, he needs to free himself from earlier false notions:

> In the past, yes, I have made sweeping indictments of all white people. I never will be guilty of that again – as I know now that some white people *are* truly sincere, that some truly are capable of being brotherly toward a black man. The true Islam has shown me that a blanket indictment of all white people is as wrong as when whites make blanket indictments against blacks. (369; italics in original)

This transformation in Malcolm X's attitude towards the racial problem, an issue central to his everyday life experiences as an African American, marks another parallel, more profound transformation: a spiritual one. Several of his religious views,

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which had been propagated by the NOI, are revised when he is exposed to the more orthodox Islamic thought that is free from the political manipulation based on his contemporary American racial conflict.

Published posthumously, this autobiographical spiritual narrative – which presents the several transformations that the author undergoes as he constructs different identities of himself in search of self-assertion within society – is ironically in itself "the utterance not of an ultimate identity but merely of the last one in the series of roles that Malcolm X had variously assumed, lived out, and discarded" (Eakin, "Malcolm X" 231). The several transformations that the author experiences through his spiritual development, however, are all defined by his powerful attempts to subvert different popular perceptions of spirituality propagated and imposed by several authorities in society, whether individual, institutional, or conceptual, as he chooses to assert his own individuality and selfhood. As a political activist advocating equality and freedom of the individual, Malcolm X's criterion in dismissing or advocating any spiritual view is not dependent on its popularity or influence on society, but is based rather on its attitude towards and appreciation of one's freedom and individuality.

Whether in refusing to fit into his school teacher's expectations for his future career, sacrifice his principles for his love of his brother, be a mere follower of his mentor, or succumb to false, yet popular, beliefs, Malcolm X rises as a revolutionary figure whose quest for genuine knowledge, by which he could discover himself and his existence as well as attain spiritual fulfillment, is the major drive behind his thoughts and actions. His individual search for truth allows him, after passing through several stages, to eventually realize such an aim:

> Despite my firm convictions, I have been always a man who tries to
> face facts, and to accept the reality of life as new experience and

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new knowledge unfolds it. I have always kept an open mind, which
is necessary to the flexibility that must go hand in hand with every
form of intelligent search for truth. (347)

This sincere pursuit of truthful knowledge that is not tarnished or led by certain

political or social ideas is what characterizes his thought as an inspirational figure

who represents the pursuit of free, liberated spirituality.

Conclusion

Several studies have attempted to discern what essentially drives writers to narrate their spiritual experiences. In examining the literary specificity of spiritual autobiography in relation to the genre of autobiography in general, John D. Barbour claims:

> All life writing reveals the interplay between communal norms for life stories and incentives for individual uniqueness. What makes this process spiritual is the author's belief that both of these pressures – adherence to communal norms and individual searching – bring him or her closer to the divine. ("Spiritual Autobiography" 836)

Hence, reiterating Eakin's claim of the interrelatedness of both the individual and the communal in autobiographical writings in general, Barbour further highlights the writers' aims of documenting their spiritual experiences in particular. Recounting one's experiences helps writers to discover and understand both their individuality and their individual existence within a larger society. Hence, the writing of the autobiography is in essence a stage along the spiritual development that the writer undergoes.

Examining both spiritual autobiographies by al-Ghazali and Malcolm X in this light enables the reader to better appreciate their narratives as significant spiritual acts in themselves. Such an approach could be traced through the early medieval versions of the genre in both the Eastern and Western traditions as well where the recording of the writers' life experiences became a "specialization" to preserve knowledge and experience, and where the ultimate goal was noticeably didactic, aiming to "inspire and guide" their surrounding communities (Kramer 1). Therefore, by relating their journeys towards self-discovery and spiritual fulfillment, both al-Ghazali and Malcolm X attempt not only to relate the influence of such journeys of enlightenment to their readers, but they also guide them to follow in their footsteps.

Such an aspiration is reflected through al-Ghazali's personal account in which he declares he wishes to "invite" his readers to renounce any worldly desires when pursuing any sincere quest for knowledge (92 [123]). Proceeding from his own spiritual transformation, he even prescribes for his readers specific solutions to different forms of spiritual agitation they might be struggling with: "We shall mention the way to guide them aright and deliver them from their mortal perils" (93 [123]). Such confidence in the impact of one's acquired experience on the advancement of the society at large is similarly reiterated in Malcolm X's testimony where he believes that, together with others who share his sincere search for truth and liberation, they "might be able to show a road to the salvation of America's very soul" (385). Hence, living through turbulent times when their communities were torn apart by clashing religious-intellectual ideologies, the two authors present their spiritual narratives as a remedy to their societies, thus both contesting the authority of other popular views in society as well as asserting their own individual views.

While both authors attain spiritual solace during their journeys – al-Ghazali during his two-year journey away from Baghdad and Malcolm X during Hajj – they do not hesitate to return to their communities. As an indispensable stage in their spiritual development, both authors do not succumb to passivity or escapism, but instead they choose to confront their societies in defiant assertion of their newfound identities, regardless of the consequent criticism they provoke. While attempting to reconcile the different religious-intellectual schools of thought at his time based on independent investigation, al-Ghazali was nevertheless bitterly blamed for dangerously "'mixing' types of knowledge" (Moosa 172). On the other hand, proclaiming a race-free spirituality that asserts the right of African Americans to solidly defend their freedom against the injustices imposed on them by society,

Malcolm X was often viciously criticized as advocating hate and militancy (Abdurraqib 177).

Writing their autobiographical narratives attests to their determination to convey stories of their spiritual salvation as examples to their societies. In specifically examining the influence of the Hajj experience on Malcolm X's transformation, Abdelwahab M. Elmessiri celebrates such determination:

> By returning to America to realize his new vision through social action, Malcolm showed that he belonged to the tradition of historical revolutionaries who want to alter reality, not by transcending or breaking away from it, but by replacing it according to their vision of the "good life." (70)

Hence, despite the "whirlwind of political activity" that was waiting for Malcolm X back in his society during his Hajj journey (Marable 321), the fervent activist returns to face his turbulent society which – as in his autobiography – is an integral part of his spiritual development. In this respect, as revolutionary as Malcolm X is in the development of spiritual knowledge in his African American context, al-Ghazali could similarly be regarded as a revolutionary scholar who significantly bridges the gap between the different religious sects clashing against one another within medieval Islam (Moosa 172).

With the transformation of both revolutionary figures during their spiritual quests, which brings about their significant influence within their societies, both spiritual narratives could be more specifically referred to as "conversion narratives" (Reynolds, "Islam and Life Writing" 476). They are not only to be understood on the literal level as in Malcolm X's conversion to Islam, but more profoundly, a conversion that both authors undergo towards an elevated state of spiritual knowledge based on their journeys of self-discovery. By presenting them to their readers, such conversion narratives, which entail "a radical transformation from a faulty 'before'

self to an enlightened 'after' self" (Smith and Watson 266), are thus not only influential to their writers but to the community at large.

Moreover, not only are both authors revolutionary figures of Islamic spirituality, but the enduring importance of their works throughout history attests to their status in the tradition of autobiographical writings in general. Such an influence does not only rest on the statuses of an esteemed medieval scholar and an iconic twentieth century activist, though Anna Bur emphasizes this as "a matter of the deepest significance" for autobiographical writings in general (130), but, more importantly, derives from their literary merit.

A specifically remarkable feature in both works is their relation to time: how the authors relate the past events of their lives and how within the actual moment of writing in their present they envision the future as well. Although autobiographical writings are naturally engaged with the past while their authors reflect on their transformative life experiences, such writings, however, could also enlighten the readers about their present as well as about the future anticipated by the writers. In examining such a quality in autobiographical – and specifically spiritual – narratives, Larry Sisson observes:

> [T]he past is produced and interpreted once more – sifted, reviewed, and reshaped in the service of present interests and future concerns. Therefore, although autobiography begins by looking backward, it is not "history" but the future to which it finally refers. Especially in the case of spiritual narratives, autobiographical images are pictures of the past pointing forward in time. (105)

Hence, when composing spiritual autobiographies, the writers' current stage of development defines their narration of past experiences in such a way that also allows the reader to understand the writers' future aspirations.

Al-Ghazali's choice to ground his work in the present is particularly noticeable through the introductory sentences of his narrative. He explains that his

work is basically an explanatory response to a "brother in religion" who asks him to disclose the intricate matters of the different, and at times contrasting, intellectual currents of thought prevailing at the time, as well as to recount his "travail in disengaging the truth" in the current cultural scene (53 [60]). Although the narrative mostly engages with the past experiences of the scholar, specifically his journey toward self-discovery and spiritual reconciliation, the actual reference in the narrative is to the present situation of the writer, one that sheds light on his attitudes towards the future too.

Thus, in relating his process of development along the years until he arrives at Sufism, al-Ghazali is at once presenting his current views and judgments on the different schools of thought at the time of his writing the narrative as well as the earlier ones he had during his spiritual crisis and subsequent salvation; he also hints toward how he wishes to continue his search in the future. Hence, exploring such a distinctive and interrelated approach towards temporality in autobiographical writings, Janet Varner Gunn explains:

> To understand autobiography as an act of speaking is to underscore
> its full temporality. Speaking takes place in time, constituting itself
> in the present, but deriving from the past and projecting into the
> future. (201)

Such an interrelated view of time in the autobiography consolidates the enduring value of the work across history as its reader does not only learn about the past – whether it is the author's past experiences, or the past referring to the time during which the writer composed the work – but also about the future.

Similarly, Malcolm X's spiritual autobiography, which provides the reader with a detailed account of the author's past experiences, is in reality a commentary on the writer's present state of both himself and his society. Written over the span of the last two years of Malcolm X's life, the consistency of his views and convictions

presented throughout the narrative at times and their frequent changes at others is proof of the strong influence the present has on the writing of the work. This is evident, for example, in Malcolm X's different opinions of the NOI which vary drastically throughout the pages of the same narrative depending on whether or not he is connected to it during the actual time of writing. In delineating his past life events, the author's present spiritual convictions are often foregrounded and consequently foreshadow his future course of action. Therefore, such a distinctive temporal quality further asserts the individuality of both writers within their societies not only during their lifetimes but also posthumously.

Differences, however, between both narratives are significant on several levels: the spiritual versus the intellectual and the political, the delineation of intricate personal details, and their pilgrimages. Although both works highlight the writers' spiritual journeys, the different contexts that the two writers belong to inevitably shape the way such journeys are presented. Al-Ghazali's depiction of his spiritual experience, on the one hand, primarily aims to criticize the growing schism among the contemporary religious-intellectual schools of thought and their biases, which are grounded in the imitation of religious authorities (53 [60]). Hence, his detailed examination of each of the schools of thought in his autobiography is only reflective of his main concern for his society.

His minimal references to details of his personal life have raised several questions on the autobiographical nature of his work. However, Michael Cooperson states that such suspicions about whether or not al-Ghazali's narrative should be regarded in light of the genre of autobiography are based on earlier assumptions by Western scholars who had not been sufficiently exposed to different personal narratives in the Arabic tradition in the first place (81), thus missing the literary

specificity of the subgenre which often celebrates the transmission of knowledge through the personal experiences of religious scholars (Kramer 1). However, fortunately, "growing familiarity" with such narratives has led such scholars to revise their standards of autobiographical writings (1). The same argument has been reiterated by Dwight F. Reynolds, as referred to earlier, as he relates such misunderstandings of pre-modern Arabic autobiographical writings and their literary specificity to the absence of a conceptual category that would examine the works in light of the tradition of representing the self and its development throughout the work. Furthermore, Robert Bell traces the disregard for intricate life details in the medieval Western tradition as well to Saint Augustine's *Confessions*. Though it conveys realistic descriptions of the author's life, it contains descriptions that are "always subordinate to the paramount narrative purpose, to trace the hero's gradual development in grace" (111). Likewise, al-Ghazali's indifference to personal details highlights both his own spiritual development and examination of the current intellectual scene.

On the other hand, instead of al-Ghazali's concern with the intellectual scene of his time, Malcolm X's narration of his spiritual experiences is concerned with the political one in his society. As an advocate of equal civil rights for his fellow African Americans at the time, Malcolm X's spiritual development is grounded in his fight for freedom. Rejecting all forms of racism and prejudice, whether propagated by the church or the NOI, Malcolm X's adoption of orthodox Islam is essentially prompted by his political views on equality. Hence, it is when he witnesses the coming together of people belonging to various races and backgrounds during Hajj that his passion for delineating such spiritual experience develops (Marable 486). Throughout the narrative, references to the political upheavals in American society then are constantly

foregrounded. Unlike al-Ghazali, too, Malcolm X's narrative is replete with several thorough details of his personal life, which he employs to subvert the racial discrimination he suffers from throughout his life.

Moreover, both works differ in terms of the formal and stylistic features employed by the authors. Although al-Ghazali writes in the first-person throughout the autobiography, his focus on analyzing different religious attitudes renders the narrative more of a research-based spiritual autobiography than a mere personal account. This is particularly evident in the way the medieval scholar chooses to structure his work. Sections that refer to each school of thought, such as "The Divisions of the Philosophical Sciences" (63 [79]) or "The Doctrine of Ta'limism and Its Danger" (71 [91]), permeate the narrative to even guide the reader toward understanding the writer's position. Even other sections that are more personal in nature and that refer more directly to the writer's life rather than the schools, such as "The Reason for Resuming Teaching After Having Given It Up" (87 [115]), are still concerned with the writer's intellectual development in particular to further highlight the different stages he undergoes along his spiritual journey.

In contrast, Malcolm X's primary concern is to relate the diverse hardships he personally experiences given the racial injustices he faces in society throughout the course of his life which leads him to use the first-person more often than al-Ghazali. The focus on subjectivity is similarly reflected in the structure of Malcolm X's autobiography. Such a structure is an outcome of both Malcolm X's and Alex Haley's choices since, during their meetings, the former used to orally relate his life experiences in the order and structure he preferred while Haley would in turn write them down in the style he saw most fitting to the literary work.

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For example, in the Epilogue, Haley refers to Malcolm X's meticulous reading of the manuscript every now and then decisively asserting his right that "[n]othing can be in this book's manuscript that I didn't say, and nothing can be left out that I want in it" (394). Haley even includes incidents of disagreement as well where upon one of their arguments on whether a certain incident should be kept in or crossed out from the work, Malcolm X "[says], gruffly, 'Whose book is this?' I told him 'yours, of course,' and that I only made the objection in my position as a writer" (421). Such a dynamic collaboration between author and writer should, therefore, be kept in mind as a determining factor when examining the work's formal and stylistic qualities.

Thus, following Malcolm X's assassination, Alex Haley chooses to present the autobiography divided chronologically into nineteen chapters where the title of each refers to a distinct phase through which the young activist undergoes during his journeys of self-exploration. He begins the work with a "Nightmare," the title of the first chapter, when the death of his father introduces to the reader the series of adversities the author goes through because of his society's racial discrimination. The choice of such a beginning is particularly significant to further highlight the immense transformations the author undergoes throughout his life until he is regarded as "some kind of a 'leader' of black people" by the end of the narrative (389). Hence, such a structure invites the reader to better grasp Malcolm X's personal development along the years and how the different experiences from childhood to his last days build up until they eventually shape his final convictions and beliefs.

Moreover, another difference between the autobiographical works rests in the formality of the language in each work. In al-Ghazali's account, the language he uses is predominantly a formal one that enables him to communicate his close analysis of each of the prominent religious schools. However, in Malcolm X's autobiography, the

language used varies from strictly formal language employed most of the time documenting Malcolm X's account of his life experiences to another less formal one that he recalls from conversations he had with other people in the past. In narrating his first experience of having his hair conked, Malcolm X relates the dialogue he had with his friend, Shorty, who made it for him many years back. He describes how he felt his head burning (55) and how he responded to his friend:

> "You feel any stinging spots?"
> "No," I managed to say. My knees were trembling.
> "Sit back down, then. I think we got it all out okay."
> The flame came back as Shorty, with a thick towel, started drying my head, rubbing hard. *"Easy, man, easy!"* I kept shouting. (56; italics in original)

Such informal and dramatic instances presented occasionally in the work are used by the author to convey to his readers the different past experiences he lived as vividly as possible, which in turn helps them to realize the several changes he went through until he attains spiritual contentment.

The third and largely significant difference between both works is their outlook on their pilgrimages to Mecca. As a Sufi mystic, al-Ghazali's visit to Mecca during his two-year search for spiritual relief is principally a reflection of a more profound inward journey. Thus, understanding the pilgrimage voyage in light of Sufi philosophy, Martin Lings states:

> The Kaaba (literally "cube" for such is its shape), the "House of God" in the centre of Mecca, is the symbol of the Centre of our being. When the exile [Sufi view of man][41] turns his face in the direction of Mecca he aspires above all, if he is a Sufi, to the inward return, to the reintegration of the fragmented finite individual self into the Infinitude of the Divine Self. (37)

Hence, al-Ghazali's physical journey was an inward voyage toward his self through which he aspired to realize the ultimate truth. Malcolm X's journey to Mecca, however, opened his eyes more towards the outer world, one in which people of

different races and ethnicities come together in brotherhood, a world significantly different from his own. However, as different as the two attitudes to the pilgrimage are, both authors find salvation as well as spiritual relief and fulfillment to their troubled souls during the journey.

In conclusion, the autobiographical works of al-Ghazali and Malcolm X stand as two landmark spiritual narratives. Although they belong to two significantly different contexts, both autobiographies highlight the role of the individual in attaining spiritual fulfillment by asserting one's individuality within the community. Both writers are revolutionary figures whose influence has had a profound effect on the way their communities view spirituality in light of both the individual and the communal. An enlightened mystic whose aim was "to make men better by leading them from a merely notional acquiescence in the stereotyped creed of Islam to a real knowledge of God" (Field xv), al-Ghazali's narrative is a statement advocating the role of independent investigation in the attainment of spiritual knowledge.

On the other hand, a political activist devoted to the cause of freedom, Malcolm X's impact on African American thought is a major one; "[h]is obvious pride in himself and his people and in the worthiness of black culture proved powerfully attractive to people whose self-esteem had been damaged by the pervasive contempt for blackness promulgated by the surrounding white racist society" (Howard-Pitney 10). Malcolm X's spiritual narrative thus inspires not only his people to seek a liberating spirituality, but also his readers all over the world. In celebrating the genre of autobiography as a testimony to the uniqueness of the human experience and an assertion of one's individuality and selfhood within society, Karl Weintraub asserts:

> We are captivated by an uncanny sense that each one of us
> constitutes one irreplaceable human form, and we perceive a noble

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life task in the cultivation of our individuality, our ineffable self.
(qtd. in Anderson 4)

Hence, in presenting their unique spiritual quests to their readers, al-Ghazali and

Malcolm X express the significance of both their personal experiences as well as that

of the human potential for spiritual liberation.

Endnotes

[1] The Islamic Golden Age usually refers to the historical period dated from the mid-seventh century to the mid-thirteenth century, a time marked by prolific intellectual productions.

[2] Although its origins date back to the eighteenth century, the movement gained significant momentum during the fifties and sixties calling for equal citizenship rights.

[3] An African American religious movement founded in 1930. It initially focused on the moral, social, and economic advancement of African Americans. However, claiming superiority of the black race that is entitled to dominate the world, the movement is often seen as racist.

[4] The first page number refers to the English translation, *Deliverance from Error*, and the second between square brackets to the Arabic original, *al-Munqidh min al-dalal*.

[5] A seminal work in the tradition of spiritual autobiography written by Saint Augustine (354-430), a noted medieval North African theologian and writer, in the late fourth century, the autobiography relates the author's spiritual development from a life of sin to one of devotion.

[6] This is in reference to Sufism, Islamic mysticism. In his interpretation of a given prophetic tradition, Jonathan A. C. Brown states that it "structures Islam in three tiers: it consists first of select articles of belief, followed by the outward submission to God through the performance of set rituals and deeds. Beyond these two basic levels of religious commitment lies the level of supererogatory piety sought by those who truly want to live in a state of constant God-consciousness: *ihsan* [beneficence]. Sufism has defined itself as the quest for *ihsan*, to be continually in a state of remembering God and acting accordingly. Sufis have therefore considered their path to be an optional one. Those who do not choose to pursue it still remain fully Muslim in faith and practice. Sufis elect to go beyond what is required" (186).

[7] Al-Harith Ibn Asad al-Muhasibi (c. 781-857) is a medieval Sufi mystic born in Baghdad and best recognized for his ascetic practices that advocate minute self-observation. See Melchert (79-80).

[8] Al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi (c. 824-905), a celebrated medieval figure, is considered "the most prolific mystical writer of the ninth century" (Radtke 265).

[9] 'Ala' al-Daula Simnani (c. 1261-1336) is a Persian Sufi mystic, writer, and teacher.

[10] Ahmad Ibn 'Ajiba (1747-1809) is a Moroccan scholar of Islamic theology. His spiritual narrative *The Autobiography of a Moroccan Sufi* is a model of "fahrasa," an Andalusian/North African autobiographical tradition. A production of the eighteenth century, the work emphasizes al-Ghazali's enduring, post-medieval influence on autobiographical writings.

[11] In his definition of the term, Marshall G. S. Hodgson states: "The term 'Islamdom' will be immediately intelligible by analogy with 'Christendom.' 'Islamdom,' then, is the society in which the Muslims and their faith are recognized as prevalent and socially dominant, in one sense or another – a society in which, of course, non-Muslims have always formed an integral, if subordinate, element, as have Jews in Christendom. It does not refer to an area as such, but to *a complex of social relations*, which, to be sure, is territorially more or less well-defined" (58, italics in original).

[12] This is the dominant ruling Islamic state during the Islamic Golden Era.

[13] The Shiite ruling state of North Africa during the tenth and eleventh centuries.

[14] The Moroccan dynasty ruling over the Maghrib during the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

[15] This is in reference to the Byzantine Empire, the eastern half of the Roman Empire.

[16] The ruling state over Persia at the time of al-Ghazali. The Seljuks propagated Sunni Islam versus the Shiite Fatimids, often causing political unrest at the time. For more on the political disturbances at the time of al-Ghazali, see Musleh (32-51).

[17] "School of Islamic thought that interpreted religious texts exclusively on the basis of hidden rather than literal meanings. Such interpretation gained currency around the [eighth] century among esoteric [Shiite] sects, especially the schismatic [Ismailiyya] who believed that beneath every obvious meaning lay a hidden, true meaning, which the [Imam] was empowered to interpret. . . Sunnite Muslims condemned the Batiniyyah as enemies of Islam for rejecting literal truth and producing confusion and controversy through their multiple textual readings." ("Batiniyyah," 178)

[18] Second in power in the Seljuk court, Nizam al-Mulk "formulated the religious policy for an area that stretched from Asia Minor to Afghanistan. In the intellectual centers of the Seljuk Empire, he founded religious madrasas [schools] (so-called Nizamiyya madrasas), which institutionalized the teaching of Sunni jurisprudence and Asharite theology" (Griffel 27).

[19] He is a celebrated Persian Sunni scholar (c. 1028-1085). Wael B. Hallaq describes him as "a remarkably creative jurist and a mujtahid of the highest caliber," whose influence on al-Ghazali's creative views and works attests to his significant role in al-Ghazali's thought (qtd. in Meijer 120).

[20] This refers to Nizam al-Mulk. See note 18.

[21] Frank Griffel offers an explanation of Asharite theology in relation to al-Ghazali's views (3-19).

[22] Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad; he is frequently quoted by Muslim scholars for his eloquent rhetoric.

[23] This is an ultimate realm of pure being as opposed to the lower realm of temporal sensory objects (Evans 9).

[24] This includes the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad; they often elaborate on and are themselves understood in light of the Quran.

[25] Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797), who was kidnapped from his African homeland as a child and ended up as a slave in the "New World," later fought against the slave trade; he is the author of the spiritual autobiography *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789).

[26] Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) is an ex-slave, an abolitionist leader, and the author of several autobiographies: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881).

[27] John Marrant (1755-1791) is a preacher and the author of the spiritual autobiography *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, A Black* (1785).

[28] Jarena Lee (1783-c. 1850) is a preacher and the author of the spiritual autobiographies: *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee* (1836) and *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee*.

[29] Sojourner Truth (1797-1883) is an abolitionist, a preacher, and the author of *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1850).

[30] The American Civil War (1861-1865) was fought between the northern and southern states over abolishing slavery. The African Americans were not merely the "subjects" of this war, but they were also "involved in and affected by every aspect of the war" (Barwick 272).

[31] This is a proclamation issued by Abraham Lincoln in 1863 (during the civil war) abolishing slavery in ten rebelling states.

[32] The Reconstruction (1863-1877) is an extension to implement the Emancipation Proclamation.

[33] This was led by Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), an influential figure of Black Nationalism. Malcolm X's father himself was a "dedicated organizer" for Garvey's UNIA (Malcolm X 1). On the ideology of Garveyism, see Martin (424-30).

[34] Known also as KKK, it originated in 1865 propagating white supremacy. It is the group behind the death of Malcolm X's father.

[35] Alex Haley (1921-1992) is a distinguished African American journalist and writer; and the author of *Roots* (1976). Upon his first encounter with a young fervent minister in the NOI named Malcolm X during an interview, the latter, to the surprise of Haley, directly and aggressively exclaims: "You're another one of the white man's tools sent to spy" (Malcolm X 391). Their second encounter, however, in another interview, "marked the beginning of a close, though strained, friendship between Haley and Malcolm X. It was a relationship that would ultimately transform the lives and reputations of both men" (Shirley and Wagner 32-33). Such a development in their relationship proves greatly beneficial to the narrative as it allows Malcolm X to feel more at ease in relating critical incidents of his past experiences which helps the reader better understand the different stages of the author's personal and spiritual development.

[36] Malcolm X admits he was greatly proud of and influenced by his father's activism (Malcolm X 6). After the KKK brutally killed him (10), Malcolm X, his siblings, and his mother suffered severe economic problems after which the family was forced to separate.

[37] Malcolm X served a ten-year sentence in prison after being caught during his burglary attempts. He is thankful for his experience in prison where he "found Allah and the religion of Islam and it completely transformed [his] life" (Malcolm X 153).

[38] Elijah Muhammad (1897-1975) is the head of the NOI during Malcolm X's lifetime. It is the letter that he personally signed and sent to Malcolm X in prison that "had an all but electric effect upon [him]" (Malcolm X 172). However, later, growing tension was noticed between the two NOI figures which culminated in Malcolm X's disrespect of his mentor after he was accused of engaging in illicit affairs with fellow NOI female secretaries.

[39] Maya Angelou (1928-2014) is an African American poet and the author of the widely acclaimed autobiographical novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). She had a close friendship with Malcolm X where, as mentioned in his work, they were often on the same tours to African countries in their attempts to internationalize the African American plight.

[40] The Islamic ritual of pilgrimage held annually in Mecca.

[41] In exploring the concept of "exile" in relation to al-Ghazali's Sufi philosophy, Ebrahim Moosa states: "We can see that al-Ghazali experienced something similar to this [exile] if we follow the way he structured his narrative account of the self and the manner in which time framed his enhanced consciousness. Not only did he detach himself from familiar surroundings, family ties, and other mundane things, but he also shared with us in his testimony that the period of exile was the most fecund of all times for exposing him to the unprecedented spiritual experiences" (125-26).

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