

Nation of Islam in Literature

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Formation of the Nation of Islam (Black Muslims) goes back to the 1930's. This formidable religiopolitical group has attained immense publicity and membership due to media publicity; its official organ, *Muhammed Speaks*, the largest circulating African-American newspaper; its economic and educational projects; and the charismatic direction of personalities like Noble Drew Ali, Wali Farad Muhammed, Elijah Muhammed, and Malcolm X. Ali, a cultist, initiated the idea of the Nation when he opened his first Islamic-based temple in Newark, New Jersey, in 1913. But it was in 1930 that Farad Muhammed began organizing the Black Muslims, spreading what would become the central precepts of the group: Whites are devils and use Christianity to subjugate Blacks, history should be retold so that Blacks be given the regal spot they deserve as original agents of civilization, and Blacks should strive for independence and sociopolitical separation from Whites. After Farad's disappearance in 1934, Elijah Muhammed, who became acquainted with Farad in the early 1930's, succeeded him and eventually became Messenger of Allah and Supreme Minister of the Nation.

The Great Depression and urban misery combined to provoke the Nation's pursuit and manifestation of separation and nationalism. The group's emphasis on racial pride also provided an escape channel for African-American hatred for and disillusion in White America.

In upholding the universal philosophy of the Islamic faith--sanctioning the Koran and the worship of Allah--, Black Muslims also rigorously confront the subordinate conditions of African-Americans in racist America. The Nation's "Fruit of Islam" bodyguards, for instance, undergo stringent training in self-defense. In accordance with its quest for self-sufficiency, the Nation has established successful educational and business enterprises in several major locations including New York, New York; Cassopolis and Detroit, Michigan; Chicago, Illinois; Albany, Georgia; and St. Clair County, Alabama. Black Muslims operate over 40 schools across the U.S., including the University of Islam in Washington.

Despite internal crises within the Nation over the years, the most conspicuous being between Elijah Muhammed and his progeny, Malcolm X, in the 1960's, and media allegations of a fanatic hate group, the Nation continues to thrive and maintain high standards of cleanliness, discipline, and hard work. Strict codes of conduct regarding tobacco, dress, drug, sex, and marriage are strictly outlined and adhered to by its members. Currently headed by the controversial Minister Louis Farrakhan, membership of the Nation is estimated at about 100,000.

Black Muslim doctrines have greatly impacted upon African-American literature. During the 1960's, the Black Arts movement, with such spokesmen as Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Larry Neal, affiliated itself with the radical Black Power concept. The movement urged Black writers to write communally-oriented works primarily in the interest of Black people, and demanded confrontational styles and themes that fostered rigorous solutions to racism and inequality. Baraka's 1965 Black Revolutionary Theatre manifesto, an anti-White, anti-bourgeois, anti-Black middle class, combative, and pro-Islamic assault on racism, stands as one of the most salient results of the Nation's philosophy on Black writing.

In 1967, embracing the Kawaida faith, a contrived religion combining key African values with orthodox Islamic canons to evolve a system of socioreligious mores, Baraka, in renunciation of the European-centered culture that had oppressed him and his people, assumed the Bantuized Muslim name Imamu ("spiritual leader," later dropped) Ameer (later Amiri, "Prince") Baraka ("blessed"). Like Baraka, and typical of members of the Nation, other African-American writers, like Haki Madhubuti (Don Lee), Askia Muhammad Toure (Rolland Snellings), Katibu (Ron Milner), Odaro (Barbara Jones), Yusef Rahman (Ronald Stone), and Nazzam Al Finah (Marvin Jackmon), also discarded their Christian, "slave" names and adopted African or Muslim (Arabic) names. Their writings also illustrate the revolutionary fervor that informed Black Arts, pro-Black Muslim styles and themes.

Baraka's pseudomodern scenario, *The Death of Malcolm X* (1965), rendered in a kaleidoscopic montage, examines the causes and consequences of Malcolm X's assassination, underscoring the drawbacks inherent in the type of Christian humility and Gandhian forbearance that some Black organizations adopted, and endorses the more insurgent strategy voiced by the Black Muslims. Baraka's play, *A Black Mass* (1965), dramatizes the Nation's theory of the origins of the White devil race through the machinations of a vengeful Black scientist.

The most elaborate literary work influenced by the Black Islamic movement is Malcolm X's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1964), completed with the assistance of Alex Haley. Chronicling the life of Malcolm X, his conversion to and subsequent disputes with and breakaway from the Nation, the autobiography highlights the reasons for the Nation's beliefs and aspirations. A number of more politically-centered texts also recount Malcolm X's life and ideologies.

Suggested readings

Baraka, Amiri (LeRoi Jones) and Larry Neal, eds. *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1968.

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Lomax, Louis E. *The Negro Revolt*. New York: Harper and Row, 1962.

Muhammad, Elijah. *Message to the Blackman*. Newport News: United Brothers Communication System, 1992.

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