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Mapping Revolutionary Consciousness: A Study of Reginald Major's *A Panther is a Black Cat*

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Abstract:

This paper critically examines Reginald Major's *A Panther is a Black Cat*, providing a firsthand account of the rise/suppression of the Black Panther Party. The study explores how this autobiography highlights the structural oppression, police violence, and strategies that sought to dismantle the movement while also highlighting the ideological foundations of the Panthers, including Afrocentrism, Marxism, and radical self-defence. This paper situates Major's work within the broader discourse of Black radical thought and resistance against institutionalized racism. By evaluating Major's depiction of state-sponsored repression, the role of political consciousness, and the cultural redefinitions of Black identity, this paper argues that the BPP's philosophy continues to shape contemporary discourses on racial justice and systemic oppression.

Keywords: State Repression, Racial Justice, Afrocentrism, Police Brutality, Racism.

The autobiographical counter-narratives of the Panthers signify their resistance against the racial suppression of their voice and identity. The Europeans could not bear the possibility that the race they had ruled for so long could own an ancestry of civilization; therefore, philosophers

and historians were recruited to distort their history and replace it with a Eurocentric perspective. Major rightly points out:

It is whiteness that becomes the yardstick, the same whiteness that offers the hope of happiness only to those Negroes who can come to terms with the inevitability of the insufficiency of Black people. This is the logic that has controlled the lives, fortunes, fantasies, ambitions, hostilities, politics, economics, and sex lives of blacks, too many of whom have responded to this cultural and psychic genocide by willingly developing an inadequacy of manhood. (138)

Generations after generations of Blacks survived in this void of identity silently until the students at American universities apprehended that their exclusion from the curriculum was unreasonable. It was disturbing for them to study that they were the race that was all along struggling in the utter darkness of ignorance until the whites rescued them. The great aporia that the African American cultural identity was engulfed in had a history of slavery, forced transportation, and migration. The Africans in America were a minority that was disenfranchised, dispossessed, and displaced based on their race in intersection with class, community, and gender, which weakened them as minorities. The youth had been toiling in a dilemma exacerbated by this identity crisis. The fragmentation that the West constructed is confronted by the writings of resistance by the suffering race of Africans in America. Major, in his autobiography, reveals how history was manipulated and manoeuvred by the West to sustain their race's superiority. He says:

It was the Europeans who actually developed the concept of race and who equated their accomplishments with their assumed racial superiority. Ethnicity has always been

highly regarded among Europeans, and until relatively recently, their racial classifications (with accompanying implications of superiority) divided European whites into racial hierarchies. People coloured differently did not stand a chance of faring better at the hands of racially oriented people who managed to make something of importance out of differences that most non-whites cannot detect. (170)

The Black Panthers knew that the Eurocentric view could only be countered through the propagation of Afrocentrism. Afrocentricity is an intellectual perspective emphasizing the superiority of the long and conventional African civilization and the African simplicity and development that the Europeans refuse to acknowledge. It attempts to answer all economic, political, social, and cultural questions associated with African people from a centred position.

Written in 1971, this autobiography is an account of the early years of the Black Panther Party and its struggle for survival. The raised fists and the charging panther on the book cover reinforce the ideology that the Panthers had adopted against the oppressive power structure. The author introduces Oakland in the first chapter as the city with a 44% Black population and a segregated dead end for the people of colour, signifying why Oakland was the centre for the escalation of the Black Revolution in the form of a political orientation aimed at the overthrow of American institutions; one had to empathize, not just identify with, the Panthers. This physical minority was at the receiving end of a generalized disregard for human worth. The writer rightly states in this regard, “For racism does not create new brands of injustice; it only blunts the sensitivities of the majority group to the inequalities it tolerates as normal” (2). He devotes the first chapter, ‘The Jungle,’ to the origin of the city of Oakland. It was primarily a place with a mixed population with a significant non-white population until the 1940s. The whites turned Oakland into a plantation in which laws prohibited the movement of the Negroes

beyond the San Leandro border. San Leandro was an all-white town with a vigilante committee committed to securing the borders of the town against Black encroachments. Such demarcations deteriorated the prospects for the Blacks. They gave all control into the hands of the barons, who identified with Oakland as being a plantation that they would rule over as a colony.

One of the foremost reasons for the inception of the Black Panther Party was the brutality of the police forces in America. While the Panthers believed that the police had never protected or served the minority communities in Oakland, the police denied such an assertion as ridiculous. However, the incidents of police brutality formed a routine at the Panther offices. The Blacks were harassed on the streets, and the FBI raided the offices and houses of Panthers as a matter of routine. Innumerable questionable police activities targeted the Panthers in Oakland and San Francisco. The private spaces of Panthers were raided and rampaged without any evidence, and after a lengthy period of harassment and constitutionally approved violence, the charges against them were dropped. Such treatment ignited the resentment that formed a lived experience for most activists in America. Major interestingly justifies the reaction of the African American masses as:

Fascism, otherwise defined as a police state, is the inevitable result of allowing those dedicated to the application of force to determine politically how and when that force will be used. An evaluation of police conduct and practices is overdue, particularly given the Panther concerns involving over-centralization, the fear of genocide, the increasing freedom of police from civilian control, and the tendency of police forces to be protective of the aberrant behaviour of individual police officers. (26)

The advancement in police technology combined with coordinated activity makes present-day police forces a formidable military operation. Airborne surveillance of crowds with helicopters, commando police vehicles, increased firepower, and availability of an array of non-lethal weaponry made the police forces feel that controlling the masses was a routine that had no negative implications. The methods used to control and contain large groups of people were their way of detecting potential lawbreakers. This shift was where the police focused increasingly on supervising the masses instead of protecting individuals, and the law turned the police into a military force, from which the public felt distanced. When the police officers only had to focus on detecting and arresting individual lawbreakers, they often indulged in mischief, effecting arbitrary arrests and gunfire, which had detrimental effects on the psyche of the minority population.

The Blacks had become the target of the police forces, which had many confrontations that ended up harming the side that lacked the resources to fight back. Police officers often took off their badges before these confrontations to maintain anonymity and perpetrate violence. The federal government had started a new wave of handling domestic problems with military solutions. The Pentagon contributed to this by constituting a riot control centre, which gave the police plans for handling civil disorder nationally. In 1969, David Hilliard, a Black Panther, called a conference where he revealed copies of the Berkeley Police Department's battle plan for masquerading as the Black Panther National Headquarters. The plan included access to riot tanks, grenade launchers, machine guns, and tear gas. It was clear that the state forces had the sole motive: to kill. All these circumstances provide a defence to the Black Panther's idea of self-defence. The Panthers claimed that when it came to them, the repressive state apparatus exceeded their usual propensity to brutalize. The Blacks were the minority, which was mostly poor. The Blacks could not have competed with the havoc that the machinery and the artillery

that the police had access to. The image of the police was so obviously superior that many Blacks did not even consider thinking in terms of armed rebellion. In such a scenario, it becomes apparent that it takes a lot of provocation and threat to elicit such a furious approach. Any authority of the state could not challenge the right to self-defence. Major observed that any institution that the Blacks created with a modicum of political expression or with the intention of social change appeared on the radar of police as a potential threat that needed to be smashed curtly. All Blacks, despite being Panthers or not, had this realization that much more state money was being spent on preparing for disorders than on treating the conditions that were leading to disturbance. It would not be an overstatement to say that the police were practically above the law. Major's autobiography is filled with voluminous detail of numerous instances of police brutality and how the Panthers were harassed without end till they finally submitted to the state repression. He aptly summarizes the relationship between the Panthers and the police forces as:

On almost every issue, Panthers and police are diametrically opposed. Police interpret the pressure for social change, which they detect as a conspiratorial approach issuing from the left, for the overthrow of the government. Panthers and others see police completely aligned with the radical right in the conspiratorial attempt to keep power out of the hands of the Black and the poor. (52)

The root of the problem lay in the fact that the police were trained in a discipline that sought solutions to the problems of asserting authority, which was always backed up by force. This led to a problem because the police officers always ended up being quicker with the trigger of a gun than with sound judgment. It cannot be denied that the police considered every organized group of Black Americans as a potential threat. This escalation in the violent approach of the

police pushed the Blacks to the point where self-defence was not an option but a necessity. Major could not be more explicit than when he says that it was not the demands but the style of the Panthers that pushed them into controversy. Otherwise, if the party's Ten-Point Program is studied, all demands can be met without significantly changing the Black-white relationship's equation. When Malcolm X called out to pick up the gun, it was an assertion of the need for the Blacks to be equipped for self-defence in the face of the peril that loomed large, courtesy of the state. He aptly states that although Martin Luther King received the Nobel Peace Prize in Stockholm, very little of the respect and honour trickled down to the masses for whom he was martyred. Thus, the Panthers were the more obvious development inspired by the more activist civil rights organizations like the SNCC, the Muslims, and Malcolm X.

The party's actions were always prone to being misrepresented by the government and the media. The image that the Panthers strived for was distorted in the light of the mass arrests that the police set out for. However, it is a fact that the Black Panthers were disciplined revolutionaries who had organized as a vanguard party committed to serving the people. When Huey Newton was arrested in 1967, he did not loosen the reins of his leadership. Within the first year of the party's establishment, Huey Newton had established a model of effective leadership among the members. To keep the morale of the party high, when he was in prison, he professed that when vicious state attacks oppress freedom fighters, it is a confirmation that they are moving in the right direction. He focused all his attention on instituting people-oriented programs that show people the need to further educate themselves about the true nature of their society. The Vanguard party does not need to be underground because it is most effective when people can see it, and it can earn their respect.

Major also discusses the major influences on the party and recounts the anti-colonial war of liberation of Algeria as a model for Black revolutionaries. Albert Camus, an essentialist thinker and a lover of freedom, also defined racism as the insensitivity of white Americans towards the demands of Blacks for dignity. He also quotes Frantz Fanon and remarks that whiteness is considered to be the yardstick for happiness, and Blacks can hope for this happiness only at the cost of accepting Black insufficiency. This was the cultural genocide that controlled the lives, ambitions, fortunes, politics, and economics of Blacks with the willing acceptance of the inadequacy of manhood among Blacks. The Panthers took great inspiration from the Battle of Algiers as they realized that the natives could also defeat a power structure if they transcended the false security of patriotism to the colonial masters. The Panthers revered Karl Marx and his call for socialism but knew that the blind application of an ideology could be hazardous. They had to take a hard look at everyday Black political situations before they could adjudge the validity of this ideology in the Black context. They were not hasty swallowers of ideologies; rather, they modified the Marxist approach to social stratification locally. The Blacks were politically and economically ill-equipped, and thus, the social class within the Black community had to be modified drastically before they could wage a class struggle.

Despite such careful handling of the ideologies, Black Panthers were faced with many failures because they were opposing more than 90% of the American population, with the people who were unsure about their abilities and found it difficult to unite. The Black middle class was a weak link in the party because their fidelities were divided, and they could not sacrifice the little progress they had made with the whites for the sake of a movement that had become the subject of state and police agony. The reality and the rhetoric of racial war were brutal to meet when the people started complaining about the Panthers for falling short of being supermen. While the party started facing setbacks, the war against the people of colour was stepped up by

the state. Increased social action by the Panthers increased the direct attacks on the Blacks by official agencies like the police and the army. The Panthers had become the prime targets in the race war because they were the symbol of Black assertiveness, which had to be discredited, disarmed, and eliminated by all the state's institutions united.

One of the most informative chapters in the autobiography is 'Law and Order Equal Justice?'. The Black Panthers were cut short not entirely due to their shortcomings but due to the rivalry they had forged with the system. Both the leaders of the party, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, were arrested in 1966, and both described their arrests as unfair, unjust, and politically motivated. The Panther leaders were still behind bars after numerous court appearances, arrests, and over two million dollars spent on bail money, court fees, and fines. Their experiences were an elaboration of point 8 of the Ten-Point program, "We want freedom for all Black men held in federal, state, county, and city prisons and jails" (Seale 89). The Panthers made it clear that they did not want to remove the concept of courts but wanted a revolutionary revision of the same to include the Blacks as equally entitled to the constitutional rights given to the whites. The goal of freedom for all Black men held in jails was not an assertion of their innocence but a belief that some men, due to their colour, class, and ignorance, did not receive a fair trial. The Panthers emphasized law and order significantly, and they mostly walked the streets with a gun in one hand and a law book in the other, ready to read out an applicable law to protect a person from being falsely arrested. However, Newton, along with Elridge Cleaver, believed that despite extensive research, there were so many laws in number that it was challenging to keep up with them all, and at the same time, some laws were so neutral that they were mostly twisted to arrest the non-conforming elements. Many Panthers delivering peaceful speeches on the sidewalks were arrested on random charges like blocking the sidewalk and using vulgar language. Most Panthers faced arrests due to the reason of conspiring to commit murder or

riots. Such claims by the police officers were primarily motivated by hatred, and the evidence they presented was mostly flimsy or nonexistent.

Huey Newton had been arrested on numerous charges that could not be proved. Bobby Seale, along with his wife and three Panthers, was arrested from his house without a warrant on February 25, 1968. Likewise, the apartment of Elridge Cleaver was raided on January 15, 1968, when police entered the apartment with drawn guns and ransacked the place without any warrant. Bobby Hutton, the youngest member of the party, was unlawfully shot to death on April 6, 1968, and Elridge Cleaver, along with six other Panthers, was arrested without any probable reason. Fred Hampton was killed in his bed in a raid conducted by 14 Chicago policemen on December 4, 1968. These and many such instances were the evidence of the racist tendencies of the police officers, which they satisfied by harassing and intimidating the members of a class that they did not want to avail their constitutional rights. The courtrooms were the arenas of strictly black-and-white wars and portrayed a graphic of the colour-coded face of justice. It appeared to be an unwritten law involving the Panthers in a case, but they were always wrong.

It is interesting to note here that the objectives mentioned in the ten-point program of the Panthers are the repetition of the words of the Declaration of Independence. Point 10 of the program, “We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace” (Seale 88)—this summary of a statement in the Declaration suggests that men institute governments to secure their rights. When any form of government begins to use the power invested in them by the people in destructive ways, the people must alter that government and introduce a new government. The foundation of such a government should be laid on the principles of safety and justice. Thus, the fate of the Blacks seemed to be blighted as long as they were being judged

by juries of men who considered themselves to be superior to the Blacks. The divide between law and order and justice had to be filled in order for the Blacks to reinstate their faith in the system. The Panthers were always accused of being too vocal in the courts, but it cannot be denied that all they said was articulating constitutional questions.

To conclude, *A Panther Is a Black Cat* remains a critical historical document, offering an insider perspective on the ideological and material struggles of the Black Panther Party. Major's work underscores the continuity of racial oppression as contemporary movements like Black Lives Matter, prison abolition, and grassroots activism continue to challenge state violence. Thus, Major's account serves as both a historical warning and a revolutionary blueprint. The text's enduring relevance suggests that the struggle for racial justice is far from over, and understanding the Panthers' resistance offers key insights into modern movements against systemic oppression.

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