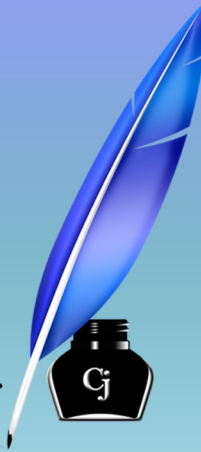


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Inception of a Revolution: A Critique of ‘Revolutionary Suicide

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This paper is a critique of one of the most militant movements to emerge out of the socio-political upsurge in USA in the 1960's, The Black Panther Part, which emerged at the time when Black Americans, particularly students and other youth, became disgruntled with the Civil Rights Movement's primary tactic of non-violence. The party was founded by two young men Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in 1966 in Oakland, California. Rarely do the revolutionaries succeed in bringing their movements to a formal closure, but the autobiographies that these Panthers wrote became the lyres of their legacy which propagated the hope for a change in the disturbing state affairs of the Americans marred by racialism and oppression. The paper endeavours to study ‘Revolutionary Suicide’, the autobiography of Huey P. Newton and analyse how a fearless young man committed his life to the cause of the exploited masses.

The 1960's were an era in the history of America when the air was heavy with the seeds of a revolution. The African-Americans in America were the uprooted population who had borne the brunt of racialism and discrimination for generations. They had been interpellated into being silent servants by the white masters. They were the people without a history or a present. While the masses were meandering in the darkness of exploitation, there were some visionaries who believed in the possibility of a better future. Only a revolution could challenge the stagnation of the dominant culture. One such counter cultural movement that emerged in the 1960's in America was the ‘Black Panther Party’. The Black Panther Party was a Marxist-Leninist organization which was founded by two young men Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in 1966 in Oakland, California. The party encouraged its members for armed patrols of the impoverished streets of the American ghettos and form coalitions with other such organizations for the cause of the oppressed African-Americans.

The nation, its people and the government were shocked at the sight of groups of black young men marching in the streets, donning black clothes with guns on their shoulders. The party was led by aware intellectuals who had discovered that the American constitution allowed its citizens to carry guns for self-defence as long as they were not concealed or pointed at somebody. This act attracted both positive and negative opinions. The African-Americans saw it as their empowerment and the government saw them as “the greatest threat to the internal security of the country”. (Hoover, 1968)

The party, which was active for only a little more than a decade, saw its flowering in the first few years. They released a manifesto titled, “what we want, what we believe’, which put to pen the demands of decent and respectable standard of living for the African-Americans. The demands spread over ten points included freedom to determine their own

destinies by having complete hold over all the institutions of the Black community, full employment for their people, an end to the fleecing of the Black Community by the White man, decent housing, unbiased system of education, exemption from military service, termination of police brutality, fair trials for incarcerated black men, unbiased jury in courts and political plebiscite. These points in written form were an answer back for the government which boasted of being democratic. It was a declaration that the African Americans would no longer bear the unjust and inhuman treatment that was meted to them in all spheres of life in America.

The biographies of the Black Panthers are a pertinent choice for critical study because these have been penned by the people who were intimately engaged with the resistance that plagued their very existence ever since the colonialists stepped on their land. The African-Americans ended up as a race without any history because of the epistemological usurpation of their experiences and memories through the colonial process. They were excluded from their identity, space and location. The only proof that they had of their past was the literature that was moulded by the colonialists, that too to their advantage. There was nothing authentic about their histories authored by their former masters as regards the experience of being colonized or of being marginalized or 'othered'. The dense fog of misappropriations cleared when Africans also began to pick up the pen. The literature thus produced by Africans themselves held a clearer mirror to the past that was embedded in the eyes of a dislocated and disenfranchised race which had been supplanted forcibly to an alien land. Only autobiographical form of writing could have come to their rescue as it is like an indissoluble marriage between history and literature. It is history in that it has source material; it contains facts, interprets facts, preserves past and draws lessons from it. It is literature as it is written to entertain as well as inform the readers. These literary-historical cross-breeds which select and then narrate their material in a manner that it engages its current readers and generations to come.

Revolutionary Suicide is the autobiography of Huey P. Newton, the founding member of the Black Panther Party, published in 1973. A study of this autobiography can throw flood of light on the movement which was peculiar in its nature and consisted of fearless young men who rose shoulder to shoulder to bring a change in the status quo.

'Revolutionary Suicide'

The autobiography of Huey P. Newton, titled as '*Revolutionary Suicide*' (1973), is oft quoted to be a portrait as well as a manifesto of the Black Panther Party. The autobiography is an unrepentant and thought provoking portrayal of the man who inspired a whole revolution in which the blacks and all the colored people of America joined hands for a common cause. It is the life story of a visionary who believed that the power to bring about change was in the hands of the masses. If the people were educated about their rights and their powers as the citizens of a country, then the prejudice at the hands of the unruly government could be controlled. The people were required to be made aware of the political situation of the country to realize that they also had a role to play in the making of the governing body of the country. Elridge Cleaver, the Minister of Information of the party opined about Huey P. Newton in his 1970 pamphlet '*On the Ideology of The Black Panther Party*':

"One of the great contributions of Huey P. Newton is that he gave The Black Panther Party a firm ideological foundation that frees us from ideological flunkeyism and

opens up the path to the future to which we must provide new ideological formulations to fit our ever changing situation.” (3)

The Revolutionary Suicide assuages many of the misattributed stereotypes that exist about the Black Panther Party like the myth that labelled the Black Panthers as ‘cop killers’ (88). Newton critically examines the black social problems of his time including the unjust behaviour and prejudice of the Judicial System. His prison experiences are nightmarish and his survival, through punishment like ‘soul-breaker’, amazes and terrifies the readers. He was a hero for his followers, but the book also reveals his weaknesses, ideologies, evils, memories and mistakes his life. He was an autodidact who taught himself everything, from reading philosophy to being aware about the political scene, and stood up for the issues that no one else had the courage to speak against. The book begins with his childhood days in Oakland. Childhood forms an essential portion of his work because the great transformation in his life from a protective and unified family to being exposed to the harsh reality of the world brought radical changes in his perceptions and views. He had a close knit family and they led a happy life. They were not rich but they afforded never to go hungry any day. His parents paid attention to his moral and religious education. The reality embittered young Newton when he had to step out of the protected walls of his house into the world. As a child, he had shared the dreams of other American children. Their great expectations had to bite the dust when they moved to school. It was then that he, like all the other blacks, realized that the American dream was not for them.

He discusses the classroom experiences also, which were mere devices to drill the White-Black dichotomy deeper into the psyche of the black students in their growing years. Their syllabus consisted wholly of such stories in which the black character was the sufferer and the white, the redeemer. Each progressing day was a school system’s assault on the black students. The whole syllabi was the extension of the idea that everything that is white is good and everything black is bad. This message did not leave the children even outside the classroom and they kept sinking deeper into a sense of inferiority. The ignorance and the inferiority, which was the consequence of such education, led the blacks to feel the need to identify with the whites, to be just like them. The whites became the standard of comparison on all fronts for the blacks. The worst was not that the blacks started considering themselves inferior, but that they started thinking that this inferiority was inescapable and inevitable. This feeling was the reason many black students became violent in their behaviour and attitude as it was the only way for them to find some sort of acceptance. All that Newton learnt in the classroom never taught him anything relevant to his life and experiences and never could he question the praxis. He summarizes his school experience in the following words:

“Not one instructor even awoke in me a desire to learn more or question or explore the worlds of literature, science and history. All they did was try to rob me of the sense of my own uniqueness and worth, and in the process they nearly killed my urge to enquire.” (20)

He accounts that such state of affairs compelled the inquisitive mind of Newton to turn to self-education. Inspired by his brother Melvin, he started making efforts for self-realization through intellectual growth. He started reading literature and had great admiration for poetry. The richness and complexity of poetry made him a sensitive person who could reason with himself all that was happening around him. He also mentions poems such as Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Bells” and “The Raven”, Shelley’s “Ozymandias” and “Adonais” and T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, which left a great impression on his

mind as he could relate to the emotions of struggle in these to his own tremulous experiences. It was his love for poetry that led him to an interest in literature and philosophy. (33) The questioning attitude that came with his analysis of such reading later allowed him to analyze his own experiences. He admits that it was during his school days that he realized the necessity to rise against all oppression. He concludes the chapter on his high school with the lines:

“My high school diploma was a farce. When my friends and I graduated, we were ill equipped to function in society, except at the bottom, even though the system said we were educated. Maybe they knew what they were doing, preparing us for the trash heap of society, where we would have to work long hours for low wages. They never realized how much they had actually educated me by teaching the necessity of resistance and the dignity of defiance. I was on my way to becoming a revolutionary.” (50)

When he joined college later, he wanted to put his ideas on a more tangible platform. He joined various social fraternities and started attending meetings of Afro-American Association. The purpose of these groups was to develop a sense of pride among black people for their history and heritage. Newton was soon disillusioned by these groups because although they claimed a lot on the exterior but their approach was not practical. They wanted to talk about the past but they were not ready to face the present. When he separated from these associations, he carried with him many lessons which he thought could actually solve the problems of the community. These experiences prepared a blue-print in his mind of the party that he was to initiate.

Newton makes an important revelation about meeting Bobby Seale at the college campus. Both of them were members of various college organizations. The rising consciousness made them hopeful that their time had finally arrived. They began to sit together ‘with the brothers’, as they used to refer to other African-Americans, and discuss the social-political situation along with the social problems. A curiosity to stay in touch with the social developments around them increased through the medium of discussions at the political education classes. They acquainted themselves with the literature of the oppressed to see how their experiences could help them understand their plight. They read the works of Frantz Fanon particularly *The Wretched of the Earth*, the four volumes of Chairman Mao Tse-Tung, and Che Guevara’s *Guirella Warfare*. These writers were the veterans of people’s wars and had worked out strategies for liberating their people. Newton felt that they shared the same experiences with these writers and if applied to their needs, their ideas could be of immense help. Bobby Seale was particularly interested in the works of Malcolm X. He collected all his speeches and ideas from various papers. The Black Panther Party was made possible because of inspiration from these writers who did not solely profess philosophy but took action in regaining their birth right and dignity, even at gunpoint. They sensed that the only way to achieve their goals was to meet force with force. Instead of labelling it as violence, they called it a response to what was being inflicted upon them. Huey P. Newton quotes in his autobiography: “Sometimes if you want to get rid of the gun, you have to pick the gun up.” (72)

This radical stance motivated the party members to settle on the symbol of a black panther for the party as it connoted the fierceness of a black panther, combined with the particular nature of not attacking unless provoked. Apart from practical application of their theory in the form of carrying weapons, they also jotted down their program into ten points as a formal document of their essential needs. They wanted to inspire the general public that they were not supposed to silently bear the violation of their constitutional rights by the state.

They sent out the message that the Blacks should start carrying arms for the purpose of self-defense. Newton had immense interest in the knowledge of law and the constitution and he studied it thoroughly to put it across lucidly to his brothers. He even advised them to carry a law book with them in their cars all the time.

Newton set out to organize the young masses through the tools of education and awareness and attempted to direct all their energy in the right direction which would lead to positive and permanent changes. Many political strategies were employed to make the party stronger but it only led the party towards division of opinions. Huey, as one, had philosophical goals for the community which not many people understood. The police and the media set out to make people believe that they were nothing more than a bunch of “young toughs” (177) strutting around with guns to shock people.

When Newton was falsely convicted of murder of a police officer, John Frey, in 1969, huge rallies were organized in Oakland and Los Angeles by the masses who believed in his innocence. False encounters had increased in the last few years of the party, but Newton knew that he would not be acquitted any sooner from the accusations because the whole system had been after him as the main target. The latter half of the book focuses on his trials and never ending series of hearings which never culminated into results. Newton had mentally prepared himself to be incarcerated for many years to come. What brought hope to him during these tough times, was that his conviction had brought the people of America together once again. People arranged huge rallies and shouted slogans outside court rooms. Newton believed that his trial could make people politically conscious. The phrase ‘Free Huey’ became a rallying cry of the people who believed that he was innocent and the police oppression was the reason for him being in jail. Once that he was in jail, the whole party began to fall apart. There were ideological conflicts between Elridge Cleaver and the rest of the old members of the party as he advocated violent armed rebellion which the Black Panthers had never advocated. Newton was doing his part in the prison by spreading awareness amongst those people too. He would have political discussions with his inmates and tell them about the unjust treatment that the country was facing at the hands of the penal system. He believed that the system could lock up his body but not his spirit.

The revolution had been initiated and he could sense that it was brewing outside the prison walls too. He was exhilarated when he was released after numerous trials after thirty three months. He did not waste even a moment and got back to the community because he believed that that was where a revolutionary’s place was. Huey interestingly quotes that the time of the party members was not measured in hours, days or months, but by dates of hearings, trials and releases. He put it down in the words: “Our lives were regulated, not by ordinary tempo of daily events but by the forced clockwork of judicial process.” (330)

Huey P. Newton can be sketched by a reader of his autobiography, as a courageous man who was dedicated towards eradicating social and economic injustices and, if required, sacrificing his life for the cause of the blacks. His zeal towards this cause was apparent from his enthusiasm to learn about the legal aspect of American constitution and willingness to go to prison. His thoughts and emotions are very radical and a little intriguing because immersed so deep into the achievement of his motives, he goes to the extent of calling robbery by the blacks of American property as justified: “We did not feel that stealing a bottle of wine or “cracking” parking meters was wrong. We were getting back at the people who made us feel small and insignificant at a time when we needed to feel important and hopeful, we struck at those who trampled our dreams.” (26)

His commentary on the education system shows the bitter resentment that he carried against the system. He was always discouraged and humiliated in front of his classmates only because of his color of skin. The whole American education system was oriented around the white values and it had no scope of accommodating children who were poor and black. (25)

Even during his time in prison he never felt the need of rehabilitation because according to him he was being punished because he had risen in support of the blacks in America. It can be said that his rational objectivity was blurred by the political intoxication that the reading of the Red Book had instilled in him. He analyzed every problem from the Marxist point of view and never welcomed suggestions from other more experienced people active in the same field. The Black Panther Party was a group which consisted of most of its members in their twenties. They were the zealous young men who got deluded by the power which they had taken in their hands. If they had sought advice of some mature social workers in the society, the petty scuffles between the members and huge mistakes such as including extremists like Elridge Cleaver and Stokeley Carmichael could have been avoided.

The autobiography thus succeeds in narrating the story which the FBI tried to suppress and destroy. Though the autobiography has been accused by many critics of being half-truth and biased, the message that Newton tries to convey through his account can neither be questioned nor doubted. He inspires and moves many hearts when he says:

“I do not think that life will change for the better without an assault on the establishment, which goes on exploiting the wretched of the earth. This belief lies at the heart of the concept of revolutionary suicide. Thus it is better to oppose the forces that would drive me to self-murder than to endure them. Although i risk the likelihood of death, there is at least the possibility, if not the probability, of changing intolerable conditions.”(14)

The bitter memories and experiences of his childhood and youth converted the innocent youth into revolutionaries who fought for the cause of their people. It is only through the medium of autobiography that we gain a clearer perspective on situations and instances which the African experienced and tolerated in America. The silence of the scared people gained direction and strength on the shoulders of these youth. Although the Black Panther Party had survived only for over a decade, during this time they made many efforts to bring attention to the organization and expose the injustices of the police. They began publishing the Black Panther Party newspaper in 1967, which included articles and poetry by the Panther members. These writings had a close relationship to the Black arts and Black Aesthetic Movements. Through the power of the pen, the Panthers succeeded in ushering a revolution which consisted of the masses. Their revolution was not restricted to the Blacks alone, but existed for all the people who were deprived of their human rights. A reading of their autobiographies provides seminal insights into the revolution which carries potential of igniting many minds.

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