

Journeys as Metaphors and Quests: The Life Writings of Leopold Weiss, Malcolm X & Kristiane Backer

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Abstract

Journeys turn out to be big turning points in an individual's life, often helping him realize the truth about his existence. In accounts of life, journeys loom large as major quests in the life of the individuals concerned and they emerge as metaphors of multivalent and ambivalent implications as such accounts take shape as powerful creative expressions. The present paper is an attempt to explore the autobiographies of Leopold Weiss, Malcolm X & Kristiane Backer, three major life writers of the last one hundred years, whose life's journeys took entirely different directions following the startling discoveries they made in the course of their wanderings. Their respective backgrounds, predicaments, and challenges in life were very diverse. However, the course and direction their lives took, following certain turning point incidents, seem to have a good deal in common which makes a study in juxtaposition very rewarding.

Keywords

Leopold Weiss, Malcolm X, Kristiane Backer, Life Writing, Journey, Metaphor, Quest

“Have they not travelled on the earth, that they have hearts (minds) capable of understanding, and ears capable of hearing? For indeed, it is not the eyes that go blind, but verily, it is the hearts, which are within the bosoms, that grow blind!” (*The Quran 22:46*)

Journeys, from time immemorial, have been looked upon as metaphors for life itself. Life itself has been, all along history, viewed as a journey from birth to death, or from one point of time and one particular station to another point of time or another particular known or unknown station. The whole gamut of life writing, therefore, has been excused to be viewed as journey narrations. Thus, life narrations are, in a sense, journey narrations, and likewise, journey narrations are life narrations.

Accounts of life, often become worthwhile because of the passionate pursuit of the person concerned throughout or a fairly long period of his or her life. Only the engagements of the person concerned with the diverse factors in life and how he or she responds to them make it of significance to the readers. At least for a good number of self-writers, such narrations are accounts of their quest to realize the truth about their existence and to unravel the mysteries of life. As for readers, indirectly, the experience of reading them determines, influences and furthers their quests and pursuits.

The Quran makes repeated exhortations on several occasions to undertake journeys on land and at sea. Journeys on land and at sea are not of the same experience. Journeys on land are journeys through the history of humanity characterized by a range of experience such as their aspirations and dreams, realizations and successes, failures and setbacks, achievements and conquests, humility and arrogance etc. Journeys at sea are journeys into the mysteries of the universe, the root causes of the skies and the earth.

The outcome of this theatrical (seeing with one's own eyes) experience of journeys is, as the Quran points out in the verse quoted above, that we have enriched minds capable of deeper understanding, and ears with sharper hearing. Over and above all these, we do not develop the blindness of the mind which makes us incapable of seeing the truth.

In P. B. Shelley's *Ozymandias*, the traveller from the antique land describes the final predicament even of the statue of an arrogant despot who once bragged of his conquests in these words: "My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings; / Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!" This poetic representation of a historic incident is a testimony to the Quranic exhortation:

"Even before you, there had been systems (of hierarchies and orders of faith). Therefore, travel on the earth, and see the nature of the final predicament of those who denied the truth." (*The Quran* 3:137)

The archetypal metaphor of life as a journey and journey as a quest for fulfilment is nothing new to literature in English. We have this as a central motif in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrims Progress from this World to That Which is to Come* popularly known as *The Pilgrim's Progress* and often celebrated as the earliest fictional work in English. *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer with its kaleidoscopic prologue is another similar poetic account that deals with the motifs of journey and quest. Both of them are in the Christian or biblical perspective. Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Ulysses*, reflective of the Victorian spirit and enthusiasm for the ancient world, deals with the same motif, in a yet more poetically powerful mode of expression with its protagonist aiming "To follow knowledge like a sinking star / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought." Here the perspective is, obviously, the non-Christian characterized by the protagonist's overweighed ethos rooted in the Greek mythologies and the stirrings are predominantly mundane as reflected in his own words:

It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Match'd with an agèd wife, I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.

That the protagonist of the poem seems to be intoxicated with the diverse and outlandish nature of the experiences that life promises, especially to a warrior and adventurer of his breed is very evident in these lines:

Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades
For ever and forever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!
As tho' to breathe were life! Life piled on life
Were all too little, and of one to me
Little remains: but every hour is saved

From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; ...

However, accounts of life, journeys and quests in the perspective of the Quran looming large as motifs of writings of literary quality and stylistic uniqueness are a relatively new phenomenon in English Language. *The Road to Makkah* (1954) by Muhammad Asad / Leopold Weiss, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), and *From MTV to Mecca: How Islam Inspired My Life* (2012) by Kristiane Backer are three major autobiographies written in English language in the last one hundred years, often singled out for their literary merit and for being intensely moving.

These three works merit themselves for being juxtaposed and evaluated together for diverse reasons. These three bestsellers of our time represent a paradigm shift in the genre of life writings in English language in the sense that they prove that all roads do not necessarily lead to Rome and that for travellers who make well-meant inquiries, roads may lead to Mecca as well. These autobiographies further prove the fact that the Quran upholds that journeys are what equip us with hearts capable of deeper understanding and ears capable of proper hearing. Conversely, we do not get affected by any loss of vision, and rather we become capable of seeing the truth about human predicament and the truth about the universe in which we live.

The Road to Makkah (1954), also known as *The Road to Mecca* or *Road to Makkah*, is the first of the two autobiographies of Leopold Weiss (1900-1992), an Austro-Hungarian Jewish journalist who after his embrace of Islam at the age of 26, was known as Muhammad Asad, and became a renowned Islamic scholar, intellectual, political theorist and spiritual writer.

Published first in the United States in 1954 by Simon and Schuster, the book that runs up to 381 pages and falling into twelve chapters, received immediate critical acclaim, including reviews in prestigious New York City periodicals. One reviewer, writing in *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, called it an “intensely interesting and moving book. *New York World-Telegram* wrote:

As suffused with Arab lore as Sir Richard Burton and almost as adventuresome as T.E. Lawrence, Muhammad Asad offers a similar blend of daring action and thoughtful observation. In addition, he surpasses either of these great predecessors as a prose stylist and interpreter of the Islamic faith.

As suggested indirectly here, Muhammad Asad’s mission in the Arabian desert was very much like that of Sir Richard Burton and T. E. Lawrence. All of them were, one way or other, exploring the orient, especially for serving the interests of the west. Asad’s mission was closely related to the interests of Zionism in the Arabian territories especially as the European scheming for establishing the Jewish nation in the Arab territory in the middle East was taking a final shape.

However, Muhammad Asad’s journeys and wanderings in the Arabian deserts, life among the Bedouins, acquaintance with several of the Arab leaders including King Abdul Aziz, and his efforts to master Arabic language and study the Quran provided him with a sharp and insightful understanding of the Arabian Muslim life, culture and faith which eventually led to his embrace of Islam. He boldly bade goodbye to the blindness that he had diagnosed to have been overwhelming the Judeo-Christian bastion of Europe.

The Road to Makkah is Asad's account of his life up to his embrace of Islam or, to be more precise, up to the age of thirty-two. It vividly gives us a graphic description of how as a young man, a university undergraduate very much attached to his domestic circles, he undertook a journalistic assignment from *Frankfurter Zeitung* and travelled across the Arabian territories, visited Palestine, Hail, Najd, Riyadh, Makkah, Madinah etc. and had a rare opportunity to gauge the magnitude of the intervention Islam and its prophet Muhammad, the Quran and its teachings had made in the life of the desert dwellers. He had a first-hand experience of what was understood as the complete transformation of the desert dwellers into a highly civilized polity that Islam had achieved. The result was that Leopold Weiss couldn't resist the inward pressure of becoming Muhammad Asad, hugging the faith of the people he studied so closely. In the preface to the work entitled "The Story of a Story," Asad says:

"The story I am going to tell in this book is not the autobiography of a man conspicuous for his role in public affairs; it is not a narrative of adventures – for although many strange adventures have come my way, they were never more than an accompaniment to what was happening within me; it is not even the story of a deliberate search for faith – for that faith came upon me, over the years, without any endeavour on my part to find it. My story is simply the story of a European's discovery of Islam and of his integration within the Muslim community." (*The Road... 1*)

Asad is particularly nostalgic and intensely emotional when towards the end of the preface he observes about the change that Arabia has undergone from the time when he experienced it and to the time when he began writing it:

"The Arabia depicted in the following pages no longer exists. Its solitude and integrity have crumbled under a strong gush of oil and the gold that the oil has brought. Its great simplicity has vanished and, with it, much that was humanly unique. It is with the pain one feels for something precious, now irretrievably lost, that I remember that last, long desert trek, when we rode, rode, two men on two dromedaries, through swimming light..." (*The Road... 9*)

For Asad, it was not a superficial change. It transformed him so thoroughly, that he soon turned out to be an enthusiastic researcher, an acclaimed scholar of the religion he had embraced, a renowned author, a gifted diplomat and statesman who played a key-role in the inception of Pakistan, and an influential translator and commentator of the Quran. Asad's journeys, in short, had been a quest-fulfilment of realizing the truth with sharpened sensibilities and deeper intellectual comprehension of the mysteries surrounding human predicament and the unravelling of the secrets of the universe, very much in tune with what is envisioned in the verse of the Quran cited above. Thus, *The Road to Makkah*, its sequel or his second autobiography *Home-Coming of the Heart* that narrates his life from 1932 to 1992, and close to a dozen other scholarly works literally made Muhammad Asad, for all practical purposes, Islam's ambassador to the west in the last century.

Yet from another angle, Asad's vivid life-like description of the Arabian deserts, the Bedouin nomads, their peculiar kind of life, culture and values in *The Road to Makkah* makes it a text of extreme importance in the context of eco-criticism, a new discipline that emerged in our times, and autochthonous writings that evince the affinity primordial communities had with nature. In yet another angle, as evident from the words of Asad quoted above, the book is presumably the last verbal depiction of the irretrievably lost Arabia and its culture that was transformed in full by the oil money.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X (1965), the result of a collaboration between the African American human rights activist Malcolm X and the journalist Alex Haley is another work of the last century that gives the account of a man's quests, journeys and struggles in life taking him eventually to Mecca and Islam. Unlike Asad, Malcolm X was not with a privileged background or origin in life. He was carrying the burden of his racial identity as an ex-slave or son of an ex-slave or merely as a member of the African community in the racist American society of the last century. Rated as one of *Time's* ten most important nonfiction books of the twentieth century, and described as "extraordinary... a brilliant, painful, important book" by *The New York Times*, the book is one of the best ever bestsellers of the world and has been translated into too many languages.

Haley co-authored the autobiography based on a series of in-depth interviews he conducted between 1963 and Malcolm X's assassination in 1965. It is an awe inspiring account of Malcolm X's metamorphosis from a Harlem hustler to a black Muslim leader championing the philosophy of black pride, black nationalism, pan-Africanism and further, to his eventual integration into the mainstream global Islamic society following his trip to Mecca for hajj. It is an immeasurably successful account of an African American's effort to discover the solution to the question of apartheid and racism in the lived version of Islam in the Arabian society and the huge gathering of the world Muslims at Mecca for hajj.

The book gives us a beautiful account of Malcolm X's life in his own words starting with his early childhood in Omaha, Nebraska, the tragic death of his father at the hands of the white terrorists of the Ku Klux Klan, first real experience of discrimination at school, hardships following his father's death, mother's going insane, experience of being sent to an asylum, life as a member of the Harlem underworld, absolute moral depravity and delinquency starting with the role of a shoeshine boy to that of a pimp and hustler which finally landed him in trouble, arrest over an alleged charge of burglary and being put in prison. Thanks to the fairly big library, it was while in Norfolk prison that major transformations happened to him and the world came to hear about him. The habit of avid reading that he developed while there, not only made him get closer to the Nation of Islam headed by Elijah Muhammad and soon be the influential leader next only to Elijah, but also gave him a keen understanding of history especially pertaining to the predicament of the African American people. This was what soon shaped him into a rabble rousing and outspoken demagogue with a mission of great commitment. However, his genuine transformation took place following his break with Elijah Muhammad over the issue of a public remark he made about President Kennedy's assassination. Now not a member of the Nation of Islam, he started establishing rapport with leaders of different walks of life with similar interests and undertook trips to African countries and a trip to Mecca for hajj. These new opportunities equipped him with the right realization about Islam's attitude to the question of race. Malcolm X's quest, in a sense, met with the profoundest kind of answer when he personally had first-hand experience of Muslims of all races, nationalities, complexions, cultures, languages, ethnicities, habits, and ways, coming together, hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder, at Mecca, during hajj. They were people who practised this verse of the Quran that was quite fundamental to their faith:

"O mankind! Verily, we have created you from a male and a female and have made you nations and tribes that you may know one another. Verily the noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the intellectually honest and the best in conduct. Verily Allah is knowledgeable and aware" (*The Quran* 49:13)

He was amazed to find how Islam had obliterated all sense of superiority over others from its followers and trampled under its feet all considerations of caste, race,

ethnicity and other hierarchies, that Muslims practically looked upon each other as brothers and sisters born of the same father and mother. The Malcolm X who returned to the United States from Mecca had not only changed his name to El- Hajj Malik El- Shabazz, but also was inspired by the sweetest ever solution to America's race issue. Further to that, he was eager to launch his practical course of action for the emancipation of his people inspired by what he discovered in Mecca. If the bullets of the assailants had not ended his life at the first ever public address on his return, the history of the black people of the United States, and indirectly that of the rest of the people too, would have been tremendously different.

A book of about 500 pages with nineteen chapters titled variously in ravishingly stunning way, and with a foreword and introduction respectively by Attallah Shabazz and M. S. Handler and an epilogue by Alex Haley and a memoir titled "On Malcolm X" by Ossie Davis, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* turned out to be an immediate success in the American publication industry relegating into relative insignificance many of the bestsellers of the time. In 1967, historian John William Ward wrote that it would become a classic American autobiography. In 1998, *Time* named *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as one of ten "required reading" nonfiction books.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X has been of multivalent significance in the world of literature. It significantly paved the way for the emergence of an all new genre in the United States namely, *Prison Literature of America* of which it is, by a consensus, an all-time magnum opus. It further inspired hundreds of writers with a new creative urge. Commenting on the uniqueness of the book in this respect, H. Bruce Franklin, author of *The Victim as Criminal and Artist: Literature from the American Prison* writes:

"contemporary American Prison literature can be dated from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Malcolm X has a unique place in the social thought of the Afro-American people. One of the many Black "common criminals" awakened by "the nation of Islam" since the late 1940s, Malcolm advanced beyond the mid 1960s' Muslim ideology to make crucial discoveries about his people, about the history of America and its alternative for the future. These discoveries still define the frontiers of both prison literature and much of our subsequent experiences as a nation state (*The Victim...* 21-22)

James Baldwin and Arnold Perl adapted the book as a film; their screenplay provided the source material for Spike Lee's 1992 film *Malcolm X*. These adaptations varying significantly one from the other, depending on the significance and focus given by each adaptor, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* has become a central text to the newly emerged discipline called Adaptation Studies too.

From MTV to Mecca: How Islam Inspired My Life (2012) by Kristiane Backer is the third autobiographical work we're discussing here focused on the themes of journeys and quests. The author of *From MTV to Mecca* is, in many ways, different from the other two. Leopold Weiss' background was Austro-Hungarian and Jewish, Malcolm X's background was that of African-American and Baptist Christian. They were both men. But Kristiane Backer's account of her life's discoveries was unique in the sense that it was that of a young European woman who was a celebrity in the media world, going out of her way, shunning all the glossy promises of fame, reputation, riches and career opportunities, for hugging the truth about human predicament that she discovered in the religion of Islam.

She was one of the very first presenters on MTV Europe. She gained a cult following and became a darling of the European press, but something was missing from her life. A fateful encounter introduced her to a completely different world, to the one she had

not known, the religion and culture of Islam. After reading the Quran and traveling widely in the Islamic world she knew that she had discovered her spiritual path and soon she embraced Islam. *From MTV to Mecca: How Islam Inspired My Life* is her private memoir that tells the story of her conversion and explains how faith at last gave her inner peace and the meaning she had sought.

Born in 1965 in Hamburg, Germany and residing in London, Kristiane Verena Backer's rise as a television presenter, television journalist and author was meteoric. At 15 years of age, Backer went to the USA as an exchange student for a year. From 1987 to 1989 Backer volunteered at the private radio station *Radio Hamburg*. In 1989 she moved to London to work at the then Europe-wide, exclusively English-language TV channel, *MTV Europe*. Backer was the first German to present and VJ there and among the programmes she presented were *The Coca-Cola Report*, *The European Top 20* and *Awake on the Wild Side*. She remained there until 1996. While still at MTV Europe, she created and moderated the youth program *Bravo TV* on the German TV channel *RTL II* from 1993–95. From 1996 to 1999 she presented the daily cultural programme *The Ticket* on *NBC Europe*. From 2000 to 2009, Backer continued to do TV presenting as well as voiceover work. In 2005 she presented the in-flight music show for *Emirate Airlines*. She was awarded a Goldene Kamera award in 1994 and in 1993 and 1994 two Bravo Otto awards for her work as television presenter. Backer also hosts and presents conferences, business presentations, and galas throughout Europe.

The biggest turning point in her life took place in 1992 when she met Imran Khan, former Pakistani cricketer. He gave her books on Islam and took her travelling with him through Pakistan. Her journey through those books on Islam and her acquaintance with the Muslim community in Pakistan brought about a thorough change in her perception of life and in 1995, she embraced Islam. *From MTV to Mecca: How Islam Inspired My Life* is an account of her journeys, sojourns, quests and realization. Although she met with setbacks of diverse kinds in her personal life, especially in the realization of matrimonial dreams, her faith in the new religion she embraced is a well-grounded and confirmed one.

Running up to 500 pages and falling into 17 beautifully titled chapters, Kristiane Backer's account of her journey to Islam is uniquely distinguished as a European woman's discovery of Islam. The book occupies a significant position among the relatively bulky lore of Europe's response to Islam, the religion of oriental origin. Her journeys to the east and, in special, to Mecca for hajj bring to the focus not only the long-cherished dream of the west for a meaningful understanding of the east, but also the fulfilment of an individual's search for the meaning of life fully in line with the outcome of journeys envisioned by the Quran, namely sharpened sensibility and deeper understanding.

Tariq Ramadan's observation in the Foreword to the book is very accurate:

This book recalls the journey of a woman, Kristiane Backer, who encountered Islam when she was a presenter with MTV. Hers was a world that had no association with religion, was disconnected from Christianity and Islam, far from any kind of spirituality. A world of entertainment, music and pop videos, acting as distraction in our lives, sometimes making us forget the true meaning of life. Whilst Kristiane was working at MTV she began a personal quest, which she describes in her book: how during her travels across the globe, she came across different people who believed in God, and it is through these conversations and experiences that her own spiritual journey towards God gradually began to unfold. (*From MTV... vii*)

Tariq Ramadan further observes:

From MTV to Mecca is an enlightening book for the Western reader, providing one individual's perspective of Islam. Its focus is not to highlight the problems that exist within our Western societies, rather it suggests that for Muslims, both converts or by birth, Islam can be a solution not a problem - it is freedom, no discrimination; it is participation, not isolation; it is to give not only to take and yes, it is about duties as much as rights. These concepts exist throughout all spiritual and religious traditions and this is where Islam can be understood from within the heart. Kristiane Backer – a Westerner, a journalist, a woman – converted to Islam and in writing about it she is able to bring the very essence of the Islamic message to the centre of Western societies. This book is not only a bridge, it is reconciliation. (*From MTV... ix - x*)

Kristiane Backer being a European woman who was fully abreast with the contemporary developments in the feminist intellectual inquiries, the book is significant still from another angle as a text of great importance in the perspective of gender studies as it narrates a very different tale of an entirely outlandish nature.

Life writings of peculiarly diverse features, the three books under discussion, in short, noticeably deal with the motifs of journey and quest, fully in tune with the Quranic verses quoted and manifest the power and impact of well-meant journeys in the realization and fulfilment of human search for truth and meaning.

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