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## *Eldridge Cleaver's Soul on Ice: A Critical Evaluation*

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### **Analysis of *Soul on Ice***

**T**his work is important in that it is an autobiography which portrays the era, the Black consciousness as it awakens, the images and stereotypes white culture had of Black, and it is an expression of White in relation to Black. The pages abound with poignant descriptions of his aching to find his truths. At times, we can be struck down by savage irony and then later, raised on high with deadpan prison humor. In all, it makes for good reading, useful pedagogy, therapeutic social criticism and it captures the times when great changes were occurring at a rapid pace in America. The free media and the liberal universities made Americans wake up to the daily realities which rich whites tried to avoid, but could no longer hide from, behind their white picket fences and gated communities.

The earliest Black writing was by a negro slave who escaped to the North and was helped by Margret Fuller and the American Transcendentalists who were abolitionists against the slavery in the South. The book, written in 1845, was entitled *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglas, an American Slave*. The account Douglas gives helped the abolitionist movement and was something of an oddity that a Black slave wrote it. The next was written by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1903 and entitled *The Souls of Black Folk* which proved that negroes could be educated and assimilated. These were iconic works that helped sympathetic whites prove points which were counter to the normative view whites had of Blacks.

Cleaver's work is different in that it was written by himself without the help of condescending whites patronize the marginalized Blacks. The title, *Soul on Ice*, is meaningful in that

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in prison, he was frozen like ice, but was able to melt and change form through his own intuition and experiences. Cleaver's autobiography paralleled the changes which were occurring throughout the country and eventually ended the total oppression of the marginalized Blacks and ended the Vietnam War. Blacks were finally able to throw away the shackles of oppression and fit into society as citizens worthy of respect.

The "Fourth Estate" (which Cleaver does not mention, he only refers to the White Establishment) is the elite 3% of Americans who own 95% of the wealth and control the government, but they temporarily lost control over the liberal media which depicted the violence at home and in Vietnam. The liberal media eventually changed peoples' attitudes and ended the violence.

In the years between 1965-1975, tremendous changes were occurring in America with social polarities battling on the streets. Violence was prevalent everywhere with Blacks against Whites and the youth against the Old Establishment. Black power was mobilizing and the Black Panther militant movement became the forefront of the Black struggle against the White Conservative Establishment, but the FBI assassinated all the Black Panther leaders and as many followers as they could which left the Black Movement without an army to battle the Whites. Some of the remaining Black Panthers became non-violent, like Angela Davis who got my vote in the presidential election of 1976. The youth were against the Vietnam War, injustices against Blacks, drug and law enforcement, and most everything the White Conservative Establishment stood for and fought for against what they regarded as the degradation of America. It was war on the streets of America with small-scale violence and mass riots daily which were televised nation-wide.

During those years, Blacks began to see whites marching with them and getting beaten and murdered along-side Blacks and then, Black attitudes began to change and they realized that not all whites were their enemy, but could be key to helping the Black Movement obtain justice from an unfair system. The sons and daughters of prominent figures in the White Establishment were getting beaten and thrown in jail for their anti-war/ anti-Establishment battles with the police. The Blacks, the youth and the poor knew they were on the side of justice while the White Conservative Establishment saw on TV that they were entrenched

on the wrong side of justice and that justice would prevail and it basically did, bringing about better treatment for Blacks, an end to the Vietnam War, and some acceptance of difference with regards to Blacks, hippies and gays.

A trend of acceptance developed towards the non-violent marches and sit-ins, due in large part to the free and liberal media which covered the police violence against these events. After the assassination of the Reverend Martin Luther King and the bombing of the Black church in Birmingham, Alabama which killed eight girls there for choir practice, much of the violence stopped while a systemic hegemony was and is still basically in power (Foucault).

After growing up in a California ghetto, Cleaver, at age eighteen in 1954, begins his adult life in state prison. Here, he learns of the Supreme Court decision ending segregation and begins to wake up to the institutionalized oppression that Blacks have been accepting.

*“Prior to 1954, we lived in an atmosphere of novocain. Negroes found it necessary, in order to maintain whatever sanity they could, to remain somewhat aloof and detached from “the problem.” We accepted indignities and the mechanics of the apparatus of oppression without reacting by sitting-in or holding mass demonstrations. Nurtured by the fires of the controversy over segregation, I was soon aflame with indignation over my newly discovered status, and inwardly I turned away from America with horror, disgust and outrage. In Soledad state prison, I fell in with a group of young blacks who, like myself, were in vociferous rebellion against what we perceived as a continuation of slavery on a higher plane. We cursed everything American- including baseball and hot dogs (Cleaver:3-4).”*

Cleaver began his awakening and personal rectification of “the problem.” In the beginning, he had to dislocate himself outside of white man’s system of oppression by casting off everything white man had convinced him of- all white standards, so he could learn anew. “It became clear that it was possible for me to take the initiative: instead of simply reacting I could act. I could unilaterally- whether anyone agreed with me or not- repudiate all allegiances, morals, values- even while continuing to exist within this society (Cleaver:5).”

The epitome and symbol of white man's segregated power over Black men was in the embodiment of white women; in Lacanian terms, he desired what "The Other" possessed and that was white women. Cleaver claimed that Negroes in prison felt this "that the white woman occupied a peculiarly prominent place in all of our frames of reference (Cleaver:8)." He, like many others had to overcome this last vestige of power that white man held over him- hegemony over white women (Foucault). Growing up in the white man's world, Black men are indoctrinated with the white race's standards for everything including their standard of beauty.

*"This little game got good to me and I got good at it. I attacked all forms of piety, loyalty, and sentiment: marriage, love God, patriotism, the Constitution, the founding fathers, law, concepts of right-wrong-good-evil, all forms of ritualized and conventional behavior. As I pranced about, club in hand, seeking new idols to smash, I encountered really for the first time in my life, with any seriousness, The Ogre, rising up before me in a mist. I discovered, with alarm, that The Ogre possessed a tremendous and dreadful power over me, and I didn't understand this power or why I was at its mercy. I tried to repudiate The Ogre, root it out of my heart as I had done God, Constitution, principles, morals, and values- but The Ogre had its claws buried in the core of my being and refused to let go. I fought frantically to be free, but The Ogre only mocked me and sank its claws deeper into my soul. I knew then that I had found an important key, that if I conquered The Ogre and broke its power over me I would be free. But I also knew that it was a race against time and that if I did not win I would certainly be broken and destroyed. I, a black man, confronted The Ogre- the white woman (Cleaver:6)."*

After his release from prison, Cleaver went about rectifying the wrongs done him and to conquer The Ogre (Jungian Archetype). He became a rapist (Freud). "Rape was an insurrectionary act [Freud]. It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon white man's law, upon his system of values, and that I was defiling his women...I was getting revenge (Cleaver:14)."

After returning to prison, Cleaver admitted to himself that he had

been wrong and gone astray "not so much from white man's law as from being human, civilized [...]." He began to write to save himself and regain his self-respect. He continued his study of socialism and revolutionary literature; *Catechism of the Revolutionist* by Bakunin and Nechayev had become his bible. As he became aware of his own empowerment, he watched Black America and the youth of America awaken and become empowered by the TV press coverage through the 1960s.

Cleaver converted to Islam and after Brother Booker T.X. was shot dead by a prison guard, he gained leadership of the Muslims of San Quentin Prison, which was endorsed by Elijah Muhammad's west coast representative. There was a split in the Nation of Islam between Elijah Muhammad and his followers that upheld a doctrine of hatred and racial supremacy and the new offshoot under Malcolm X, which admitted the possibility of brotherhood between Blacks and whites. Cleaver became a follower of Malcolm X to the disgust of other inmates who professed allegiance to Elijah. Cleaver was in prison when the assassination of Malcom X occurred and it seemed to have empowered him even more.

"Many Negro convicts saw Malcolm's assassination as a historic turning point in black America. Whereas Negroes often talk heatedly about wiping out all the so-called Negro leaders whom they do not happen to like or agree with, this was the first significant case of Negro leader-killing that anyone could remember. What struck me is that the Negro convicts welcomed the new era. If a man as valuable as Malcolm could go down, then as far as I was concerned so could any other man- myself included (Cleaver:54)."

Cleaver was aware of the white man's system while caught up in its jaws in a racist hegemonic system (Critical Race Theory). *Soul On Ice* is telling in its portrayal of the abusiveness of the system that engendered its own products (Foucault). These Black convicts were trapped in a recidivistic PPP cycle: prison-parole-prison that had no escape. Like Cleaver, Islam did provide an escape for many.

*"...Negro convicts, basically, rather than see themselves as criminals and perpetrators of misdeeds, look upon themselves as prisoners of war, the victims of a vicious, dog-eat-dog social system that is so heinous as to cancel out their own*

*malefactions: in the jungle there is no right or wrong. Rather than owing and paying a debt to society, Negro prisoners feel that they are being abused, that their imprisonment is simply another form of the oppression which they have known all their lives. Negro inmates feel that they are being robbed, that it is 'society' that owes them, that should be paying them, a debt [...] It is only a matter of time until the question of the prisoner's debt to society versus society's debt to the prisoner is injected forcefully into national and state politics, into the civil and human rights struggle, and into the consciousness of the body politic. It is an explosive issue which goes to the very root of America's system of justice, the structure of criminal law, the prevailing beliefs and attitudes toward the convicted felon (Cleaver:58-59)."*

After practicing Islam for a time, Cleaver began to question the exclusivity of its racial bias and its negativity towards others. "...not too long ago it was my way of life to preach, as ardently as I could, that the white race is a race of devils, created by their maker to do evil, and make evil appear as good; that the white race is the natural, unchangeable enemy of the black man, who is the original man, owner, maker, cream of the planet Earth; that the white race was soon to be destroyed by Allah, and that the black man would then inherit the earth, which has always, in fact, been his (Cleaver:66)."

Cleaver began to question this imposed separation as another type of segregation that kept Blacks from inclusion in American society. Black exclusion and marginalization from mainstream society was simply based upon skin color, but marginalization takes many forms.

Foucauldian systems of power produce the marginalized subjects through limitation, prohibition, regulation and control which become naturalized and concealed hegemony until a free and liberal press and education bring about a change in awareness. Benjamin Franklin frequently made the claim that a free and liberal press was essential to any democracy to bring about the changes necessary for progress and fairness.

Cleaver renounced the teachings of Elijah Muhammad and no longer saw the need for Islam in his life. He was continuing onto his next stage of evolution...He was to become in his words an Opra Winfrey Watcher (reference to the successful African-

American hosted TV show). Opra Watchers are the oppressed peoples of color around the world, who are opening their eyes to the world-wide system of oppression “by white enslavers, colonizers, imperialists, and neo-colonialists (Clever:65).”

Watching America awaken from his prison cell, he took heart in the youth movement. He saw the importance of the “political conflict between the generations that is deeper, even than the struggle between the races (Clever:67).” Cleaver saw the rebellions of Black students as precursor to the youth movement as a whole. His anti-white stance changed when he saw white protesters getting beaten in Black marches, in fact, it became a form of salvation, “When white freedom riders were brutalized along with blacks, a sigh of relief went up from the black masses, because the blacks knew that white blood is the coin of freedom...(Clever:73).”

Another aspect of *Soul On Ice* that makes it useful is Cleaver’s portrayal of the loss of white heroes. Many of the white heroes like cowboys gunning down Native Americans and soldiers wiping out nips and gooks were being revealed as villains, who perpetuated crimes against mankind. This analysis of myth and symbol makes the book a must-read for race relations and the deconstruction of history and America's myth of Manifest Destiny.

Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* is a time portal into a traumatic period in American history when violence ruled and when the White Establishment had to start fighting their own sons and daughters and found themselves on the wrong side of justice, then great changes occurred at a rapid pace. What began as violent battles and riots soon became non-violent marches and sit-ins which made violence on the part of the White Establishment unjust and those injustices were woven into the fabric of the White Establishment until mainstream America had enough and tore apart the stitching which could no longer hold the flag together and a new awareness brought about change.

The question remains whether it took bloody sacrifices and violence (a Jeffersonian armed revolution) to begin the end of the injustices or if Thoreau's Civil Disobedience like not paying taxes or Gandhi's Ahimsa (non-violent protests) covered by a free press (Franklin) would have brought about the same changes.... Were Eldridge Cleaver's rapes of white woman part of a necessary means to an end or was the end inevitable and all the violence just hastened the changes which were needed? If the human animal

(Freud) were not so greedy and lustful, then Ahimsa (non-violence) would work, but sadly, most of the wealthiest and most powerful men in the world are the most greedy and lustful and cannot overcome their animal instincts so injustices may continue until...

While most of the violence has subsided, marginalization is still prevalent. The Conservative White Establishment and the "Fourth Estate" did not take all these changes sitting down. They knew that they had to redirect the angst of the masses and regain control of the country and have accomplished their goals. The Fourth Estate already controlled the government; so next, they devised and implemented schemes to regain their power. They overthrew the liberal media replacing it with a conservative media indoctrinating the public that "liberal" is derogatory and anti-American. Next, the Fourth Estate implemented a 'divide and conquer' plan to personalize oppression by several means such as 'reverse discrimination' pitting individual against individual; a process where a less qualified female or minority gets the job or school position over the more qualified white male.

America has an African-American President, but discrimination and tensions still prevail and more work needs to be done and more awareness needs attention to get closer to equality for all.

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