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## Malcolm X and the Psychology of "Barn Burning"

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**Abstract.** This article provides historical and psychological data that may bear on the recent firesetting tragedy involving Dr. Betty Shabbaz, Malcolm X's widow, and his grandson, Malcolm Shabbaz.

By now it's old news that Malcolm Shabbaz, the grandson of Malcolm X, allegedly set a fire in the apartment of his grandmother, Dr. Betty Shabbaz--Malcolm X's widow. The fire occurred on the night of June 1, 1997 and left Dr. Shabbaz, head of the office of institutional advancement at Medgar Evers College in New York City, with burns over 80% of her body.

Much has already been written about Malcolm Shabbaz's psychiatric problems and unstable upbringing. Some reports in the international press have referred to intergenerational psychiatric problems including Malcolm X's mother, Louise Little, and daughter, Qubilah Shabbaz. However, virtually nothing in the international press has referred to historical data suggesting intergenerational firesetting in the Little/Shabbaz families.

Early in the morning of November 8, 1929, the Lansing, Michigan farmhouse of Earl Little, Malcolm X's father, burned to the ground. Earl's story to the state police was that white men had set the fire to get the Little family to leave town. He stated that he had used a shotgun to drive them off after the fire was spreading. However, a local judge had already ordered that the Little family vacate the property after legal action induced largely by a land-development company. A two-gallon oil can was found in the ruins of the farmhouse. Earl had bought kerosene with it hours before the fire. Other inconsistencies in Earl's story led to the police jailing him on suspicion of arson (and for illegal possession of a gun.) At least one biographer of Malcolm X, Bruce Perry (see below), posits that Earl might have believed that if he (Earl) couldn't keep his house, no one else would either. Also, Earl might have believed that his family would be more likely to get financial assistance if people believed he was burned out rather than kicked off his property.

Early in the morning of February 14, 1965, one week before Malcolm X's assassination, a fire broke out in the house in which he and his family had been living. The house was owned by the Nation of Islam (NOI)--then led by Elijah Muhammad--and had been provided to Malcolm, who had been the NOI's premier proselytizer. However, after bitter conflict that led Malcolm to leave the NOI, its lawyers had petitioned legal authorities to oust him and his family from the house. A hearing on an eviction date had been set for February 15. At least two witnesses were puzzled that Malcolm had been found in front of the house and was smiling as it burned. Pieces of broken bottles that had been used as Molotov cocktails were found in the house. Very unusually, unburned gasoline was found at the bottom of a number of these bottle fragments--as if they had not been tossed. A gasoline-soaked rag wick of one bottle was found--as if the bottle had been tossed without the wick being lit. Although Malcolm was a voracious reader and pawned many books, few--burned or in toto--were found in the house. (Had they been burned in anticipation of a fire?) Glass shards around the house suggested that at least some "cocktails" had been thrown from the inside of the house outwards, instead of the converse. In the face of all of this, Malcolm blamed the NOI for the fire and stated that its representatives were trying to kill him.

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So, there are data suggesting that Earl Little, Malcolm X, and Malcolm Shabbaz may have engaged in firesetting. And if firesetting has indeed been an intergenerational behavior in the family? What might it suggest? Empirical research on the individual psychology of firesetting may show that psychiatric problems, a chaotic and fragmented family upbringing, abuse (sexual, physical, emotional), parental psychopathology, and the need for revenge are factors significantly correlated with a foreseeing perpetrator.

Another relevant surmise may lie in the work of personologist Henry Murray. Murray has described the Icarus Complex inspired by stories written by Ovid and Apollodorus of a youth and his father who escaped imprisonment in the Labyrinth. The Labyrinth was "so excellently devised that not even the maker of it could discover the exit without a clue." (See Hamilton (1969/1940.) However, the youth, Icarus, and his father, Daedalus, were able to flee the Labyrinth by flying with the aid of artificial wings. However, "the delight of the new and wonderful power went to the boy's head." (See Hamilton (1969/1940.) Not heeding the warnings of his father, Icarus flew too close to the sun. The glue holding the wings melted. The wings fell off, Icarus dropped into the sea, and the waters closed over him. Murray states that an individual exhibiting an Icarus Complex is likely to be very ambitious, to have the ambition fragmented when faced with failure, to be intensely narcissistic and crave immortality, and to harbor an attraction to fire that may result in firesetting in an expression of ambition, narcissism, and failure.

In a racist society, what member of a downtrodden racial group is not susceptible to an Icarus Complex--being trapped in a Labyrinth, attempting to flee through flying, and in the first heady moments of freedom misjudging the situation and courting disaster? Is this complex a substrate of the ghetto fires of the 1960s in the United States, the chants of "Burn, baby, burn?" The complex may be more broadly applied to any relatively powerless group--ethnic, class, and so on. As is depicted by the Snopes family in William Faulkner's "Barn Burning," firesetting not only has instrumental value, but subsumes narcissism, ambition, and failure--all as an expression of power.

The fiery revolutionary burns, then may burn out or be burned out by others. Those who are downtrodden from the beginning may burn as the only transient means to success, even if through antecedent and consequent failure. Is it any wonder that an expression of Richard Wright from "The Man Who Lived Underground" (cited in Pickney, 1997) can be so easily applied to the literal and figurative firesetter--be it fires of Good or Evil? "You've got to shoot his kind. They'd wreck things." (See Bradford, J. & Dimock, J. (1986.) A comparative study of adolescents and adults who willfully set fires. *Psychiatric Journal of the University of Ottawa*. 11, 228-234; Gruber, A.R., Heck, E.T., & Mintzer, E. (1981.) Children who set fires: Some background and behavioral characteristics. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. 51, 484-488; Murray, H. A. (1955.) American Icarus. In A. Burton & R.E. Harris (Eds.) *Clinical studies in personality*. Vol. 2. NY: Harper, pp. 615-641. Perry, B. (1991.) Malcolm: The life of a man who changed Black America. Barrytown, NY: Station Hill; Rasanen, P., Hakko, H., & Vaisanen, E. (1995.) The mental state of arsonists as determined by forensic psychiatric examinations. *Bulletin of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, 23, 547-553; Hamilton, E. (1969/1940.) *Mythology*. NY: Mentor, pp. 139-140; Pickney, D. (May 15, 1997.) The drama of Ralph Ellison. *The New York Review of Books*, XLIV(8), pp. 52-60; Soltys, S.M. (1992.) Pyromania and firesetting behaviors. *Psychiatric Annals*, 22, 79-83.) (Keywords: Icarus Complex, Revolution.)