

‘Worthy of all praises’: Muhammad Ali and the politics of identity

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How a battling Muslim achieved global appeal

The complex figure of Muhammad Ali offers an interesting way into thinking about the relationships between rebel heroes and those who identify with them. Ali was an iconic figure in the struggle for black civil rights in the 1960s, while simultaneously retaining a measure of popular support, including initially within the media, because of his larger than life personality, entertainment value and outstanding skill as a boxer. When he was persecuted by the establishment and the subject of media vilification in the mid-1960s, after refusing to be drafted into the US army, this only increased his heroic status for many. But by 1996 he was back in the bosom of the establishment, and given the honour of lighting the Olympic flame in Atlanta. His career has been celebrated in a number of documentaries and in the 2001 biopic starring Will Smith, while his 1996 film *When We Were Kings* was widely acclaimed. Because of the ‘war on terror’ his identity as a Muslim is now in higher profile, and he has intervened as a peace broker between Islam and the West on a number of occasions, though all the while retaining his establishment status.

Considering that Ali’s last fight, in December 1981, was a devastating and embarrassing defeat, his enduring stay in the limelight is all the more remarkable. This is partly because his legacy cannot be confined neatly into any one category: to label him as solely a boxer or athlete is to do him an injustice, and the range of people for whom he has been a source of identification is very diverse. He is an

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assertive Muslim male who has global appeal, and a figure that enables alliance between Muslims and non-Muslims. His appeal transcends race, culture and religion. He remains a phenomenon that is hard to define within the terms of ordinary language: 'Fighter, celebrity, draft dodger, activist, poet, victim, inspiration, champion - pick a year and choose a label. Muhammad Ali has been them all.'¹

Ali's faith was significant to many Muslims long before the 'war on terror' began. In my family household Ali fights were awaited with great anticipation. My mother (not even a sports fan, never mind boxing fan) would cook special South-Asian dishes, the house would be filled with an air of excitement, and my brothers would enthuse about Ali's greatness. The fight itself would be watched, commentated upon and enjoyed in great admiration. Any small act of 'defiance' or 'playful misdemeanour' by Ali was lapped up with great applause and recognition. Quite simply Ali belonged to us and we would watch with a mixture of awe and envy, especially because of the way that *white people respected Ali the Muslim*. We emotionally invested in adoration of Ali because he encouraged us to escape for a time what is and must be. Ali provided an inspiration. He was an oasis for us in a world where being non-white meant being constantly subject to abuse, taunts and ridicule. He provided us with respite. This, in part, is what this essay attempts to explore. How could a Muslim-Pakistani family living in Scotland have such strong feelings for an African-American who specialised in a sport that, until Ali's arrival, had no real following within South-Asian communities?

The transformation of Cassius Clay

When the 18 year old Muhammad Ali, then known as Cassius Clay, returned from the Rome Olympics in 1960 he was received as an All-American Hero. Turning professional immediately afterwards, he soon endeared himself to the American nation. Glowing articles in mainstream publications celebrated his prowess and welcomed his re-invention of boxing, along with his repartee, boastfulness and attractive personality. *Time* magazine, in an article entitled 'Cassius Clay: The Dream', adopted a tone bordering on sycophancy:

Cassius Clay is Hercules, struggling through the twelve labours. He is Jason chasing the Golden Fleece ... When he scowls, strong men shudder, and when he smiles, women swoon. The mysteries of the

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universe are his tinker toys. He rattles the thunder and looses the lightning.²

As can be seen in this invocation of Greek myth - and its hint at the possibilities of inter-racial intimate affection - Clay was immensely popular with the white American public, even during the era of Jim Crow, which was still going strong during the period when Clay first became a sporting celebrity.

But Clay's seemingly apolitical stance disguised a growing interest in civil rights, and in particular a fascination with a small but growing black organisation called the Nation Of Islam (NOI). The doctrines of the NOI, as well as containing elements of Islamic doctrine, also included large parts of what can only be described as folklore, including the prophecy that the white race would one day be destroyed. In spite of its flaws, however, it offered African-Americans the opportunity to follow a religious and social doctrine that was a potential source of self-esteem, whilst simultaneously promoting greater political and cultural self-determination. The group's growing popularity during the postwar years coincided with increasing awareness amongst African-Americans of global decolonisation efforts, and of the emergence of independent African and Asian nations. It offered a chance to connect with what they called the 'Original' people of the world. When Ali joined the NOI, it was a separatist, black supremacist organisation.

The Nation had grown only modestly until the 1950s, but the release of ex-prison convert Malcolm X quickly changed that. Malcolm X rose quickly in the NOI hierarchy and became a leading figure of the civil rights movement. He toured the United States extensively, helping to establish twenty-seven mosques in different cities. Mike Marqusee suggests that Malcolm X could see in Clay what the white sports journalists refused to acknowledge - an independent intelligent boxer who played by his own rules and not the stereotypes laid down by white society.³ (Later, in 1975, when NOI's leader Elijah Muhammad died, his son Wallace Muhammad would de-emphasise racial issues and move the movement closer to orthodox Islam, renaming it *Al-Islam* and adopting the later teachings of Malcolm X. Ali welcomed these changes, which however precipitated a splinter movement still teaching the doctrines of Elijah Muhammad, led by Louis Farrakhan.)

In February 1964 Cassius Clay became the world heavyweight boxing champion, after beating the incumbent champion and favourite to win Sonny Liston. However at

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the press conference the next day the media ignored Clay's boxing ability, wanting only to know if he was a member of the NOI. The vilification had begun. Cassius Clay was no longer. Muhammad Ali was here. When asked what his new name meant, Ali replied in the literal sense: 'Muhammad means *worthy of all praises*, Ali means the *most high*'.

The response by the predominantly white media was swift and disparaging: and for a long time they refused to call Ali by his proper name. Worse was to follow in 1966, when Ali was re-classified as eligible for draft and called up. Within hours of his declaration that he would refuse to serve in the US army, citing his religious and political objections to the war, the WBC had stripped Ali of the title. The *Los Angeles Times* immediately proclaimed: 'Clay is a black Benedict Arnold'; while, according to the *New York Times*: 'Clay could have been the most popular of all champions but he attached himself to a hate organisation'. Congressman Frank Clark stated: 'The heavyweight champion of the world turns my stomach. To back off from the commitment of serving his country is as unthinkable as surrendering to Adolf Hitler or Mussolini'.⁴ The hero had become a villain.

Eldridge Cleaver gave a different perspective:

Ali is the first 'free' black champion ever to confront white America ... In the context of boxing, he is a genuine revolutionary ... To the mind of 'white' white America and 'white' black America, the heavyweight crown has fallen into enemy hands. Ali is conceived as 'occupying' the heavyweight kingdom in the name of a dark, alien power.⁵

Ali eventually won his appeal against conviction in 1970, but his career was seriously damaged: by then he had not fought for nearly four years. Throughout this period the sports press were more interested in Ali's political and religious viewpoints than they were in his fighting ability.

After he was stripped of his title, Ali grew more assertive in his new role as a NOI figurehead. He toured Africa and Asia, where his popularity was such that he met with many heads of states, including Abdel Nasser. His growing assertiveness was part of the wider growth in militancy of the civil rights movement. Influenced strongly by the political philosophies of Malcolm X and the growing independence movements in ex-colonial countries, people were coming together in the black consciousness movement that became known as the Black Power movement.

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A world champion

Ali's conversion to Islam and his refusal to be drafted were the impetus from which he transcended his role as heavyweight boxing champion to become a world champion. His stance was an inspiration for many black activists in America, and was the catalyst for other human rights movements, both in America and around the globe. Black Power energised and educated black Americans. It spurred new interest in African liberation struggles and the plight of the powerless world-wide. Ali's defiance influenced and helped empower groups who had endured similar experiences, not just of racism but of all kinds of prejudice and exclusion. 'Black' became not a physical colour but a political colour, around which radicals and activists could rally. The figure of Ali, like those of other rebel heroes - such as Ho Chi Minh or Che Guevara - can in some senses be understood as a precursor of more recent developments of celebrity culture. He was endowed with qualities that went beyond his initial status. He was/is not *just a boxer*, but a social and political inspiration, a living persona of social and political awareness.

For many British-Asians, Ali - a battling Muslim - was a source of inspiration and solace in the racist climate of the time. This helped a younger generation of UK immigrants in the 1960s and 1970s to identify with a *black* politics that was more assertive and demanding. The younger generation was not willing to 'bow down to the white master', and adopted an ideology of asserting their rights, and being more vocal and visible in their demands to achieve equality in society. Black Power created a global 'imagined community', and by relating to this community young blacks in the 1960s could show solidarity with and gain strength from the images of black assertion that were embodied by Ali. This can be seen as very similar to the concept of the 'ummah' - the global Islamic community which supersedes nationality and gives sustenance to those who belong to it. (Briefly, there are two tiers to Muslim identity, one related to faith and one related to country, but faith overrides any other component of identity.) The concept of the 'ummah' and conceptualisations of political blackness can be seen to draw upon similar feelings both of exclusion and empowerment.

Young Muslims often feel that within British society they are members of a relatively small and weak minority; but their religious beliefs and practice traverse the globe and history, and they are thus part of a vast and (potentially at least) powerful force. And in this way the boundaries defining Muslim identity are also

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strengthened. Young Muslims can draw strength from an Islamic identity that provides solidarity with other Muslims, as well as an avenue of escape from being constantly identified in negative terms. The logic of this process implies a positive (re)conceptualisation of Islamic identity, that transcends local, negative attributions. In many ways this is also an imagined community - given the heterogeneous nature of Muslim identity, histories and societies around the globe.

My parents would always emphasise that Ali was a practising Muslim who embodied the notion of the 'ummah'. But for my brothers and sisters, whilst religion was important, Ali's stance against white racism superseded his religious identity. For me and my brothers (in particular), Ali's defiance and willingness to confront racism was part of an attitude that asserted or demanded recognition, rather than 'turning the other cheek'. The younger male members of our household in particular respected Ali for his confrontational manner, given that that we were more likely than our female siblings to be victims of physical or verbal racist abuse or attacks. It is possible that, as victims of such abuse, we adopted a harsher attitude in understanding our position in society and developed more militant responses when confronted by racism. Ali's multiple identities were appropriated in distinct (though in some respects similar) ways by different members of the family.

This helps explain why Ali was so popular in countries that previously did not follow boxing - both Muslim countries and newly independent nations. Ali was aware of his popularity in Islamic countries:

I can't name a country where they don't know me. If another fighter's going to be that big, he's going to have to be a Muslim, or else he won't get to nations like Indonesia, Lebanon, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Syria, Egypt and Turkey - those are countries that don't usually follow boxing.⁶

Ali drew on his status as an international symbol of Islam when he helped in the release of American hostages in Iraq prior to the Gulf War. And after the attacks on the USA in September 2001, he appealed to the mainstream American public not to judge Islam by the attacks. Once again he was willing to challenge negative views on a group with which he was publicly identified. However, as Ali has been increasingly deployed by the US government as a diplomat and ambassador, he appears to have been to some extent integrated into the machinery of US capitalism. For example, an

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organisation called Hollywood 9/11 - a group established to steer the entertainment industry's war effort - employed Ali to promote a message that the War on Terror was not a war against Islam. Thomas Hauser, a friend and biographer, argues that Ali's 'rough edges' have been glossed over, and he is now a part of the American establishment. Ironically, at time when Ali's Islamic faith is widely seen as a challenge to the West, Ali the individual has become more acceptable.

Perhaps because of a combination of old age, illness and incorporation by the system, Ali has been surprisingly silent about the ongoing War on Terror. It seems his legendary lip has been silenced, or at least limited to general pleas for tolerance and mutual understanding. This silence regarding current issues can be frustrating for those once enamoured of Ali's defiance, including my family: particularly since all the issues that led to the emergence of Muhammad Ali - racism, war, Islam, political consciousness - are still echoing loudly in western discourses. But in spite of the PR makeover, and all the corporate packaging, Ali's legacy today can still be seductive to new generations.

Ali's one-time mentor Malcolm X once urged African-Americans to think beyond the confines of America. And Ali attempted that. His appeal was never exclusive or narrow but inclusive and global - and this may in the end explain why a Scottish-Pakistani family with no previous interest in boxing could find comfort in Ali's defiant stance.

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Notes

1. Cover quotation, M. Ali & G. Early, *I'm a Little Special: Muhammad Ali Reader*, Yellow Jersey Press 1999.
2. Quoted in H. Bingham and M. Wallace, *Muhammad Ali's Greatest Fight: Cassius Clay Vs The United States of America*, M. Evans and Company 2000.
3. Mike Marqusee, *Redemption Song: Muhammad Ali and the Spirit of the Sixties*, Verso 1999.
4. Cited in *Muhammad Ali's Greatest Fight*, p73.
5. E Cleaver, *Soul On Ice*, Dell 1970, p91.
6. *I'm a Little Special*, p58.