

## **The Dialectics of Alienation: A Study of Amiri Baraka's Plays**

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One of the most distinguished and versatile African-American dramatists in the present time, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), has written plays which, though unrelentingly propagandistic, draw attention to issues not merely of racist concern but of profound human significance — issues like displacement, loss of identity, alienation, and existential despair. It is not, therefore, surprising that his plays project themes which have not only socio-political implications because of their being predicated on the African-American political dynamic, but also symbolic and mythical ones traceable to their use of motifs drawn from religious and folkloric myths. His plays, indeed, seem to exemplify what Langston Hughes and W. E. B. DuBois envisioned as a responsibility and role of young Black artists during the Harlem Renaissance. Elaborating their views, Baraka (1966:251-252) says:

The Black Artist must draw out of his soul the correct image of the world. He must use this image to band his brothers and sisters together in common understanding of the nature of the world (and the nature of America) and the nature of the human soul.

The Black Artist must demonstrate sweet life, how it differs from the deathly grip of the White Eyes.

Baraka's impact on American consciousness is not only that of a writer but also that of a symbol suggesting a blending of European radicalism and "rebellious energies." His plays suggest interaction between an "action and its perspective," between the present and the past, as also the foreseen time, between the loss of identity and awareness of it in terms of what could be known as one's own destiny.

Baraka's work carries a high voltage emotional charge because of its attempting to use the theatre as an agent of revolutionary change, social, political and cultural, in America in accordance with his credo, spelt out in his provocative essay "The Revolutionary Theatre." • Baraka's artistic endeavor focuses on the recovery of the Black self through the acknowledgment of the ambiguities of history and the necessity of action, even "violent action," to impart meaning to activities in which Blacks are engaged. It insists on bringing about a collective consciousness that would clash with a society so as to help liberate the Black self. His art, indeed, traces the possible course that the Black self can follow so as to overcome the dilemma endangered by the split consciousness.

Significantly, whether functioning as projectivist poet or as Neo-Marxist theorist, Baraka regards art as energy that could undermine fossilized traditions and their artifacts, needed to invest feeling with significance and to disclose the characteristic qualities of a culture which, in his representation, is Black culture. In his plays from "Dutchman" to "A Recent Killing", Baraka experiments with a dramatic form suited to his vision of the emergence of a Black liberated nation, employing naturalistic structures. His play "Slave Ship" attempts a synthesis of the Western emphasis on "shape" and the African stress on "emotional response to an ideal." His use of violent incidents and brutal images in his plays is suggestive of ritualistic violence and is intended for achieving the Blacks' political and cultural transformation. Of all his plays, the award-winning "Dutchman" is the most popular, attracting serious critical attention.

The play is set in a subway train and centers on two characters, a White woman, Lula, and a young, educated middle class Black, Clay, engaged in flirtatious conversation, which very soon turns into a violent exchange of views, covering a wide range of issues. The conversation starts with Lula teasing Clay concerning his compromising himself so as to make his way up in the White society. When accused of being a "liver lipped White man," Clay becomes furious and retorts that he has every right to be what he is, whether or not she approves. He declares that he is sitting there in his buttoned-up suit to restrain himself from murdering all White people which would cure his neurosis. Enraged by his outburst, Lula stabs him to death while the other

passengers look on without moving. They throw Clay's body out of the train without making any comment, and at the next stop, another young Black boards the train.

Critics have identified Lula as a symbolic representation of White America and Clay, of Black America. Significantly, when Clay's manhood is called into question by Lula, he bursts out, calling her a whore, for which Lula murders him, signifying that Clay is reduced to dust (death). Other interpretations of the play regard Lula as Eve and Clay as Adam, as also Lula as the Flying Dutchman, wandering frantically in search of a redeemer suggested by the title of the play as also the fast moving subway train in which they are captives, having no freedom to love or reject the other. The play, "Dutchman", is noted not only for its symbolism but also for its skillful characterization and scintillating dialogue expected of an intellectual White liberal like Lula and a highly educated, knowledgeable Black man, Clay. What brings about the tragic end is Clay's assertion of the Whites being ignorant of the true character and nature of the Blacks, which enrages Lula, intent on showing him his place in White society.

Encouraged by the success of "Dutchman", Baraka presented his play "The Slave", which in a sense enlarged the meaning of the former play featuring a Black revolutionary leader and poet, Walker Vessels, his divorced White wife, Grace, and her husband, Bradford Easley. Set in Easley's living room to which Walker comes, the play projects a tragic encounter between them, symbolizing racial relations in America. Coming to Easley's home, apparently to claim his daughters by Grace, Walker engages himself in hot exchanges with the Easleys, which ends in the deaths of Grace and Bradford Easley. Ironically, Grace, his former wife, and Easley, a former professor, bear no illwill against him and so are nonplused as to why Walker is intent on torturing them.

Significantly, the dialogue that ensues between Walker and the Easleys progressively becomes philosophical in that they indulge in a tirade against each other's ideology. Telling the Easleys why he had to leave Grace, Walker declares that his protest is not against individuals but against three hundred years of oppression which his revolutionary stance demands. Getting drunk, Walker tells them that he had been to their place earlier while they were out, and has seen

his daughters whom he wants to take away with him. Grace refuses to part with her daughters as she does not want them to suffer on account of Walker's "self-pity" and "some weird ambition."

Significantly, their conversation is interrupted by explosions caused by the bombing of the place by Walker's revolutionary followers, which symbolizes the course that their encounter will take. Enraged by Walker's stance and insults, Bradford pounces upon him, which makes Walker shoot him. Soon there is another explosion destroying the house, killing Grace, struck down by the falling roof. In response to Grace's plea concerning her daughters, Walker tells her that they are dead, which makes Grace question him as to how he knows of their death. The play ends with Walker stumbling out of the door, which suggests that he has done away with his past marked by his marriage to Grace and the writing of imitative poetry and has emerged as an unrelenting Black revolutionary.

The play ends in tragedy because Walker is driven to the assumption of an attitude of hate which has the ironic effect of enslaving him in his hour of triumph. The play is subtitled "A Fable", signifying that it should be interpreted not literally but literarily, since it features a relationship like that of Othello and Desdemona, suggestive, perhaps of the relationship between Baraka and his White wife, Nettie, that helps explore a love-hate syndrome characterizing racial relations between the Blacks and the Whites in America. Addressed to the Black audience, the play projects the destruction of White intellectual liberals like Easley and the severing of the Blacks' relationship with the Whites represented by Grace, which the Blacks hope for.

Set in a church, the play "The Baptism" features a Minister, a homosexual, and a boy who is to be baptized, which is suggestive of his intention to anchor the play in religion and love as a postulate of religion. The play is a burlesque of the morality play, since it projects a religious ritual in farcical terms. The boy comes to the Church sobbing and pleading with the Minister to pray for him as he has sinned. The Minister covers up his helplessness to help absolve the boy's sin through platitudinous outpourings which amuses the homosexual who awaits an opportunity to seduce the boy. A messenger on a motorbike arrives to take the boy away, telling him that his father has sent him. Refusing to accompany him, he says that he has been sent there to save them,

which makes the Messenger tell him that he has no time to argue as his father is going to destroy "the whole works that night with a grenade." Despite his protest, the boy is taken away forcibly by the Messenger, leaving the homo-sexual behind who ironically, symbolizes love, the chief tenet of religion amidst the dead bodies. The play ends with the homosexual leaving for the bars before they close.

The play may be regarded as an allegory presenting the boy as a Christ-figure, the Minister as institutional religion, and the women as a Christian Society, and the homo-sexual the devil incarnate. This points to the irony with which the play is charged. The play represents God being dissatisfied with the modern world, which makes Him take forcibly His son, symbolizing love and rescuing him from a pointless crucifixion while presenting the devil (homosexual) as trying to ensnare people. The play suggests the triumph of the devil by default rather than anything else that could possibly aid his machinations.

Written in an autobiographical strain, the play "The Toilet" explores the issues concerning "nominal leadership" and a "capacity for compassion." Set in a boy's toilet in an urban high school, the play features a number of Negro toughies led by Ora who await the rounding up of and bringing to the toilet of the White boy, Karolis, who is deemed to have insulted their leader, Ray Foots, by addressing a love letter to him. Their plan is to make Karolis fight it out with Foots which would help Foots to sustain his leadership as an arch tough guy. While waiting for the arrival of Karolis and Foots, the Black boys indulge in horse play and profane talk interrupted by the knocking of a White boy, Farrell, to the ground by Ora. Beaten severely and dragged into the toilet by the Black boys, Karolis is bullied by Ora before the arrival of Foots. Seeing the beaten Karolis, Foots suggests his being let off, which, ironically enough, Karolis does not agree to, saying that he would like to fight it out with him. Foots being physically the weakest of the group, tries in vain to avoid the fight so as to save his face. Karolis being stronger than Foots, overpowers him, which makes Ora and others intervene and beat him up. Helped by the boys to his feet, Foots has the mortification of having water from the commode thrown on his face by Ora which symbolically suggests his baptism. The play ends with Foots cradling the head of the severely beaten Karolis in his arms.

Though the play represents love as being homosexual, it succeeds in presenting racial relations in such a way as to answer the realities informing them.

The significance of Amiri Baraka's achievement as a poet, playwright, essayist and political activist lies in his being at once a cultural seismograph of the shifts in the African-American sensibility caused by a series of political developments culminating in the Black Power Movement and in his being a barometer of the convulsions in the American consciousness.

#### **REFERENCE**

Jones, Le Roi (1966) "Home: Social Essays". New York: William Morrow.