

Trauma and Turbulence in African American Drama: Amiri Baraka's *The Slave*

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Abstract – *The vision of the African American studies on drama has undergone a major transformation with the passage of time. The strategy and approach of the writers focus on the questions concerning the survival of Blacks in contemporary times and their future prospects. The writers highlight the dreadful white reality that holds a modern Black captive and victim. Ed Bullins, a prominent figure in African American Drama exerts a substantial impact on the subsequent development of the tradition. At present, Black writers turn away from addressing anticipated readership and appealing the plight of Blackness in America, and the Black literature has changed from a social-protest oriented form to one of the dialectical nature of the Black people—Black Dialectics. This new thrust has two main aspects: dialectic of change and dialectic of experience. These are the two major fields in the mainstream of new Black creativity. The dialectic of change, once called protest writing when confronting whites directly and angrily, altered to what was called Black revolutionary writing. The dialectic of experience is the writings of being of being a Black. These writings emerge from painful and precarious situations of Blacks.*

Key Words: Revisionary Theatre, Street Language, Experimental Theatre, Field Slave and House Slave

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The playwrights have contributed significantly to the canon of Black theatre. The prime treatment in their plays is the Black family or African Continuum. They view the Black family through very new and wide lenses and enlarge the social unit to include not only blood related individuals but also persons linked by race, culture and heritage. Their experimentation of interactional family connects Black peoples all over the world which informs, reinforces, inspires and empowers Blacks to survive the worst possible odds. To approach the Black family in America and elsewhere, as the Progeny of Africa is to give credence to its wholeness. A close examination of the selected plays of Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, Adrienne Kennedy and Ntozake Shange reveals that the portraits of black family are varied, but the message is constant: an indissoluble and intimate bond exists that fortifies and preserves the integrity of the Black family. The plays of Amiri Baraka are revolutionary in spirit. The playwright has narrated the trauma and turbulence of the protagonists in agitating mood and mind. They devastate the white hegemony and glory. *The Dutchman* and *The Slave* are the two prominent plays to be presented as a study on traumatic and turbulent experience of black protagonists.

The Slave (1964) is described as 'A Fable in Prologue and Two Acts'. An old field-slave, Walker Vessels, briefly introduces in the Prologue. As the

character abandons the stage, while singing some blues, he transforms himself into the Black revolutionary Walker Vessels. Vessels returns to confront Grace, his former wife (a white woman) and to take their children with them. Throughout the play sounds of explosions are continuously heard in the background. Vessels kills Grace's husband (Easley) and Grace is reached by one of the explosions. At the end of the play, child's cry is heard and the spectator does not know whether the children have been killed or not.

The techniques of theatre employed by Amiri Baraka is distinguished from Adrienne Kennedy. In his autobiography, Baraka recalls the years of his youth in the Air Force and in the university when he would spend many hours alone, thinking, reflecting and trying to go deep into himself in a journey of self-discovery. He has experienced the toil and turmoil of blacks: "I was stretched between two lives and perceptions (I have told you it was four Black Brown Yellow White-but actually it's two or the real side, the two extremes, the black and white, with the middle two but boxing gloves)" (*Autobiography* 49) Baraka vacillating between those two extremes, finally decides to take sides and stay only with one: the Black one.

Kennedy projects the actual pain in her plays whereas Baraka culminates the pain into creative

rage. It is a transformation of agony and anxiety into violence and hatred. Baraka's *The System of Dante's Hell* testifies the tremendous agony he had gone through: 'Shadow of a man.(Tied in ditch ,my own flesh burning in my nostrils. My body goes simple death, but what of my mind? Who created me to this pain?)' (*System* 122)Baraka did actually touch death in his inferno and the pain was so deep that it turned into the rage which poked him out of the ditch. : 'Once, as a child, I would weep for compassion and understanding. And Hell was the inferno of my frustration. But the world is clearer to me now, and many of the features, more easily definable. (*System* 154)It is only through self-introspection that Baraka touched his inner self and, after doing so, he felt ready to offer his best service to community.

Amiri Baraka has proposed a new revolutionary theatre in African American theatrical movement. It is the illustration of his self-introspection that Baraka took his theatre to show his community the need for them to perform the same journey. The new theatre needed to raise consciousness in people so that they could see and understand themselves and their condition in order to make the appropriate corrections. The new theatre needed to be born out of the death of past stereotypes created by systems that had undermined African Americans and their culture. Baraka defines the new revolutionary theatre, as a theatre that

Must EXPOSE! Show up the insides of these human beings, look into black skulls....The Revolutionary theatre must teach them their deaths. It must teach them about silence. It must kill any God anyone names except common sense.....It should stagger through our universe correcting, insulting, preaching , spitting craziness-but a craziness taught to us in our most rational moments. (*Black Magic* 211)

In the struggle for national consciousness, African Americans were encouraged by new African nations to turn away from western ideology and aesthetics. The assassination of Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba- who also appears as one of the characters in Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964)-was a turning point which reinforced struggle. Baraka himself testifies: 'We identified especially with the new nations of Africa. Malcom X had sounded that note clearly. And the assassination of Patrice Lumumba touched the African American intellectual and artist community at the point where nerve touched the bone.' (*Theatre* 23)It was Lumumba's assassination, and then Malcom X that contributed the burst of African Americans' pain in the form of rage and violence reflected in the themes and language used by the playwrights of the Movement.

Language, as examined by Baraka, is essential to culture's own expression. The creation of a new language by the African American artists of 1960s was one of their main goals. The effective form of

culture, Baraka proclaims, is speech, for words have power:

The words of language become something specific related to their individual users, but for the same reason, each culture has got its own language, because they have their own experience.....and all cultures communicate exactly what they have, a powerful motley of experience.(Home 166)

Furthermore, language needs to be infused with feeling, force and spirit in order to create a theatre of world spirit: 'Where the spirit can be shown to be the most competent force in the world.Force.Spirit.Feeling.The language will be anybody's, but tightened by the poet's backbone. And even the language must show what the facts are in this consciousness epic, what's happening' (*Home* 212)

The Slave, then, becomes an expression of this language of unique experience of one's self and one's culture. Vessel is aware that he has been speaking a language which is not his, for, although, he has learnt many words, 'almost none of them are [his]' (*Slave* 53) Vessels decides to adopt a new language: action. The spirit, force and feeling are shaped by the rage, violence and passion that originates through the ritual of dialogue.

Baraka and artists of Theatre Movement adopted the ritual because they thought rituals were most powerful than talking heads. They believed that Western theatre was mainly talking in a drawing room, while life was taking place outside. The African American artists wanted to get away from drawing room model, which is what Vessels's poetry attempted to be and is undermined by Easley who calls it. When Baraka wrote about ritual drama, he was not aware he knew and understood what he meant. It was not until after he had written *The Slave* that he realized ritual was actually history, the lives of African Americans: 'We perform our lives. We live our lives every day. We might think we do differ things but a lot of things we do are the same things: we get up, we go to school, we eat...and we go to sleep, and then we get up again. The sun and moon. The same. (*Slave* 32)And he adds that people go through infinite changes, not in the sense of displacements, but in the sense of same thing, but always changing. And this is what ritual means. It is the constant of consciousness, reconsciousness, and re-reconsciousness.

The structure of *The Slave* is circular, like the seasons cycle, like the sun and moon. The play is introduced by Vessels dressed as an old field slave, and is the same character who closes it. This circular ending may seemingly imply that no change has occurred, and yet there has been change, i.e the achievement of consciousness, a recovery of a hidden and painful reality. The

gradual changes and developments of the character will lead to new changes and new consciousness.

The ritual of insult in African American culture is interpreted as verbal art form. Insults and street languages are present in most of the Movement plays. Baraka has used it in order to emphasize the derision and abomination of blacks towards whites. The use of ritual insult is the perfect outlet for anger. The practice of ritual insult increased at a time when African Americans are subjected to assaults and insults upon their dignity. Ritual languages are used as a mechanism for teaching and sharpening the ability to control emotions and anger. This is precisely how Vessels operates at the beginning of the play. He uses the ritual of insult, and the rhythm of insults increases throughout the play. Finally, Vessels reaches a point where he realizes talks-e.g. insults-are not enough. He does not want to use verbal devices to control his anger, so that he becomes action itself. His selected action actually redeems him.

In the new language of action, the expression of hatred becomes a significant component. Baraka uses hate as energy force in the character of vessels. He also uses this force in plays such as *The Baptism* and *The Toilet*. Hate is not a final result but ritual means of expressing which leads to love. Malcolm X understands hate as a cleansing force. Malcolm X discerned how to use any means which could offer African Americans a therapy to liberate their hatred. It is through the expression of that hate that Clay, in *Dutchman* and Vessels, in *The Slave* recover their identity.

The hatred, anger, and admonition expressed by Vessels is not only against Whites but also against himself. He admits there are polluted elements comprising the pursuit of his political motives and actions. He vehemently expresses:

'[dragging] piles of darkies out of their beds and [shooting] them for being Rheingold ads' (*Slave* 66)

Many years, Baraka has experienced in the similar vein and way:

"All the white-hating is not necessary to love oneself. Unless [one] is insecure as [he was].....The positive aspect of all that was clear, it represents struggle, the desire for liberation. The negative was the bashing together like children. And so, those structures could not last, the internal contradictions were so sharp....." (*Autobiography* 322)

At that time, though, language served as liberating force, a way to relieve the rage which was boiling inside and needed to be taken out. Once that phase was burnt, new changes arose in Baraka's work.

Spoken languages as well as other literary or theatrical devices such as symbols serve in Baraka's

writing as a liberating instrument not only for his characters but also for African American history itself. Harold Cruse proclaims:

"The African American's one great and present hope is to know and understand his African –American history in the United States more profoundly. Failing that, and failing to create a new synthesis and a social theory of action, he will suffer the historical fate described by philosopher who warned that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (*Cruse* 565)

African American history, as a consequence, has experienced two kinds of slaves: the house slave-symbol of subjection, and the field slave-a rebellious potential who would take any chance to escape from his master. It is the latter type that opens *The Slave*. As pointed out by Brown, Vessels, "represents both past and present (older and younger) militancy" (*Brown* 150). This differentiation, not established by Sollors, proves Sollors' statement is not totally applicable to the play. Sollors proclaims that Vessels is shown as the old field slave and interprets this character as one who 'remains the eternal entertainer, the poet, the 'slave' unable to liberate himself or the other' (*Sollors* 137). Although a slave at the end, he forgets that vessels is a militant slave, which does not mean he remains in bondage, and, unable to liberate himself and others. Baraka previously mentioned, our history, our lives, are a ritual, but even in the repetition itself there are changes that keep us coming to keep us going.

To Baraka, music has always meant freedom: "Music is an emotional experience and a philosophical one....Moving in the blue/black streets there was freedom, a possibility of becoming anything I could imagine. I was completely on my own and everything in that world began and was defined by me, in me, by music" (*Autobiography* 48). With Baraka's personal experience, music, rhythm and movement could not be excluded from his play. Music infuses emotion, force and spirit in language, as it becomes another liberating element. Throughout his conversation, Vessels transforms, fluctuates from laughter to anger, from tenderness to cruelty, from Standard English to Black English, Vessels's fluctuation of moods and gestures transports its quality to his speeches. Vessels uses every means he can to express himself. His taking action is not only shown his overt militancy but implicit in his spoken and body language of gesture and movement as well. As if Vessels was himself a saxophone, crying all different notes and sounds that convey multiple moods. The play becomes a sea of musical, rhythmical sounds whose breathing commences to increase until it explodes in a final note: the simultaneous child's cry with the sounds of explosions outside the house.

It does not seem strange to observe Baraka's ability using words as musical notes. Baraka was –and still is– a poet before he began writing plays. At certain, he realized his poetry had acquired a dramatic form composed by different voices. Infusing the emotion that poetry and music convey, Baraka creates a liberating process from western form and creates new aesthetics, in which ritual becomes the essential means towards the goal. *The Slave* is Baraka's transitional play towards the search of new theatrical forms, as presented in plays such as *Great Goodness of Life* (1966), in which multiple set is used, *Home on the Range* (1968) a play to be performed with the music of Albert Ayler improvised in the background, *Slave Ship, an Historical Pageant*, which has little dialogue, but mainly sounds, screams, smell effects, and instruments including the saxophone and African drums, and finally the of Amiri Baraka are of scientific socialism. Baraka's creativeness has not reached a full stop, for he keeps coming to keep going–creating new possibilities of expression. He has been awarded for his writings, and *The Slave* obtained the drama prize at the First World Festival of Negro Arts held in Dakar, Senegal, in spring of 1966.

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