



The Rhetorics of Baraka and The Black Legacy

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Abstract

The present study is devoted to explore the consistent angry and rebellious nature of the poetry of the controversial black American poet Le Roi Jones or (Amiri Baraka), as he later on called himself after conversing to Islam. It attempts to show how he manipulated poetry to set free his anger and opposition of the American dream and the American way of life. Language and Poetry are Baraka’s major mediums which aim at revealing the falsehood of the American labels. They are also the vehicles to indicate the existence and the role of the African-Americans in the modern American community. His objection to the American way of life sometimes becomes very extreme that he calls his fellow black Americans to work and destroy it because it only reflects the white standards of life. The study also examines how Gates’s theory of the ‘Signifying Monkey’ is applicable on Baraka’s poetry. It also attempts to show some of the characteristics of Baraka’s style and the techniques used to express his anger through poetry.

Key words: racism, violence, black identity, oppression, segregation, freedom, rebellion.

I. Baraka and the Black Identity

The assertion of blackness through poetic language is one of the preoccupations of Baraka’s art. Thus, to prove his black identity and his existence in the American community Baraka lashes severe attack and criticism towards the successive white American administrations for discriminating Americans according to race and colour.



The main message of his poetry is that the time of black slavery must be ended at all costs even if it means absolute death. Black Americans must fight the white supremacy if they want to prove their existence on the American lands. Although Baraka's thought is formed by passing through three main ideologies during three distinctive periods of his life, his angry black voice is the major factor that unites them. The prevailing sense of anger which marks most of the poetic output of Baraka will be illustrated through analyzing poems which are selected from different periods of the poet's career.

Amiri Baraka stands as a unique force among the Afro-American authors of the 20th century especially during the 5th, 6th, and 7th decades of the 20th century. He is best known for his significant role in establishing Black Arts Movement as both a writer and theorist. Baraka is a poet, dramatist, essayist, novelist, Black Nationalist, and a political activist whose name is associated firmly with the names of such avant-grade poets as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Robert Creeley, and Frank O'Hara. As a result of his practice as a black cultural activist a great deal of credit is attributed to this controversial poet for the significant role he played in reforming the course of modern American poetry and in clearing way for other black American writers to make their voice audible in a white rolled and dominated community. The dominant thought of his works is the call for the rights and the free life of the black Americans. In fact, most of Baraka's works are marked by his consistent preoccupation of establishing the black identity in the American community.

For Baraka the Afro-American nation is an oppressed nation, and its people, whether in the black-belt land base of that nation or as an oppressed nationality spread out around the rest of the nation- state, still face a revolutionary struggle. The black



race is still “oppressed by imperialism, and its liberation and self-determination can only be gained through revolution” (Gwiazda,464). Poetry, hence, acquires a different dimension. It becomes a significant device used in the struggle against the white supremacy.

The poems of Baraka provide a true and realistic historical account for the intolerable oppression and segregation the white authorities inflicted on the black Americans. Baraka’s anger and objection is against the white American way of life and the policy of the successive white American administrations. It even goes further to reach the literary level. Baraka believes that poetry must be employed to establish the black American identity therefore; he stands against the academic way of writing poetry which was established by the white poets such as Eliot. And advocated by some African American poets as Contee Cullen.

Although Baraka’s works witnessed sharp ideological shifts as a result of adopting four ideologies during three stages of his life, they are connected by his notable recurring and consistent black voice and his ability of uttering extreme statements. Through his career as a writer, Baraka’s works are usually viewed “as belonging to distinctly defined periods, ... “Beat” (1957-62), this period is also referred to as “Bohemia”, “Transitional” 1963-64, “Black Nationalist”1965-74, and “Third World Marxist”1974-2014. (Kimmelman,30). Through these stages of his career Baraka “explosively developed an urgent and militant African-American poetry and poetics(Ibid:30)” in which the voice is distinctively black.

Langston Hughes’s (1902-1967) poetic experimentations on Blues and Jazz are among the major influences on the poetry of Baraka who is best described as a faithful student in Hughes’s school. Hughes’s energetic poetry which reflected



sincerely the black voice and identity motivated Baraka to write energetic and even militant poetry aiming at invoking the black Americans to revolt against the false American dream. Black pride, black unity, black poverty, false blackness, racial violence, and anti-imperialism are among the major themes Baraka tackled in his poems. Blues and Jazz were the expression of the freed slaves and their anxiety of racism and segregation. It envelops "rhythms of the drums that the slaves are free and they are waiting to avenge themselves." (Anderson: 5)

Another non-literary experience which exerted a heavy and notable influence upon his works and thought is his visit to Cuba in 1960. Years later Baraka became a Marxist believing that Marxism is the suitable ideology that may unite the black Americans and redefine the concept of the American way of life.

II. Experimentation of Gates's Theory In Baraka's Poetry

The literary works of Baraka arise from the black tradition with an extraordinary power to manipulate language in order to intensify its blackness and to promote the black quality of his works. Baraka, being an eccentric practitioner of black aesthetics, manipulated a variety of techniques of style, diction, thought, and structure. In his book *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988), Henry Louis Gates asserts that the power of the black author to manipulate language enables him to cross freely above the boundaries between the "white and the black discursive universes." (Gates:46) Gates's theory refers to the mastery over language practiced by African-American writers to permit their voice to speak for itself after long years of silencing and segregation. Gates considers this theory a strategy of survival to signify the oppression of the black Americans since the years of slavery until the modern age. This theory is best practiced through the implications,



repetition or the use of black vernacular. Gates defines Signifying as “ a way of expressing one’s self” through a rhetorical practice that is highly systematic. (ibid)

Baraka’s practice of Gates’s theory can be clearly seen through applying certain poetic techniques: First his use of negro-slang which is commonly used in the black suburbs is a distinctive feature of Baraka’s poetry. Thus words such as *ya, yeh, nigger, gonna, bullshit, cause, nothin, aint , gon,etc.*, are used as assertion of blackness. These words are used deliberately to break away from the everyday language of the whites and to separate the black community from the white America.

Repetition of sounds and words such as “*rrrrr*”, “*tuhtu*”, “*oooo*”, “*eeee*”, “*aaahhhh*”, “*dadada*”, “*freeee*” is another technique used by Baraka to stress the idea of the black voice and the black identity. Black people must have their peculiar type of poetry that is not governed by the established rules of versification invented by the whites. Thus, through such repetitions Baraka succeeds to create an original black poetic audio-quality that distances his poetic output from the American poetic mainstream of his time. Baraka’s “Black Art” a poem published in 1966, is an example of the poetry of social and political protest and of the poet’s break with the white standards of writing poetry. Beach believes that this poem “marks a true beginning to Baraka's poetic revolution as a black man”(Beach:132). It is a poem that asserts the poet’s idea of the physical quality of poetry because he "knew that ... art had to be a weapon in the struggle for black liberation, if it was going to be worthy of our people's memory“(as quoted in Brennan,(2003: 309). Besides, this poem is, although criticized severely as extreme and racial, viewed as an angry black cry against the subjugation and injustice of the whites.

Let there be no love poems written



*Until love can exist freely and
cleanly. Let Black people understand
that they are the lovers and sons
of warriors.....*

.....
*We want a black poem. And a
Black World.
Let the world be a black poem
And Let All Black People Speak This Poem
Silently
Or LOUD (ll.43-54, Nelson:999)*

In his comment on this poem Baraka states that “ the idea of ‘ Black Art’ was to challenge the "whiteness" of art as posited by a white supremacist society, as if somehow the society could be a slave society but the art not reflect that slave-owning and slave-being mentality”(Baraka:152-153).This poem is an example of Baraka's determination to fight racial oppression. These lines have an affirmative tone confirming that the black identity is a leading path to a world of perfection and justice. The preceding lines of the poem have a violent tone indicated in the words 'kill', 'assassin' and 'shoot guns':

*....We want “poems that kill”.
Assassin poems, poems that shoot
guns...Poems that wrestle cops into alleys... (ll. 19-21)*

The above quoted lines reveal the physical nature Baraka want poetry to acquire. For Baraka even poetry must take action in the process of liberating black people from the white subjugation. He wants “a poetry that was direct, understandable, moving, and political. And lastly an art that was revolutionary, poetry that would help transform society, not merely lament or mystify the status quo”(Baraka:152).



Commenting on this poem Harris states that...unlike other contemporary avant-garde writers, Baraka is not satisfied with an abstract aesthetics, or even a materialist notion of language. "For Baraka," ... "a poem's effectiveness is measured by how much change it has brought into the world"(quoted in Brennan, 301).Baraka succeeded to dignify the black identity of the American Negroes in his poetry:" Black people, come in, wherever you are, urgent, calling/you, calling all black people". The sound of this poem is authentic black sound coming from the neglected and forsaken black neighborhoods and suburbs to call for freedom and justice. This poem is Baraka's angry call for his fellow-citizens who are subjected to the conflict of racism and the continuous oppressing attitude of the white American government to stand and change their reality.

More strikingly is Baraka's peculiar use of repetition in this poem. The repetition of sounds such as "rrrrrrrrrrrrrr / rrrrrrrrrrrrr ... tuh-tuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuh / ... rrrrrrrrrrrrrr" creates a sense of uproar that parallels the poet's sense of dissatisfaction and anger towards the racial discrimination directed to black Americans. It is part of Baraka's poetics to create confusion and uproar in order to make his poems energetic and active. On the semantic level, such repetitions are not meaningless for they refer to sound of airplanes and of machine guns. In fact, they enhance the revolutionary nature of the poem.

Naming is another poignant technique through which Baraka emphasizes his black identity as apposed to the whites'. In fact, this technique heightens Baraka's sense of his blackness which he embraces reverently and enthusiastically. Through this technique Baraka explores the American history, literature, culture, economy and reveals his divergence from the traditional and academic literary canons set up by the



whites. His poem “In The Tradition” provides a good example of his use of the naming technique:

*Tradition
of Douglass
of David Walker
Garnett
Turner
Tubman
ofragersyeh
ragers
(of Kings, & Counts, & Dukes
of Satchelmouths & SunRa’s
of Bessies & Billies & Sassys
& Mas
Musical screaming
Niggers
Yeh
tradition
of Brown Welles
& Brown Sterling
& Brown Clifford
of H Rap & H Box
(cited in Jackson, 364-365)*

Jackson comments on this technique stating that “Baraka names historical figures, musicians, writers, sculptors, painters, songs, and musical styles as both positive and negative examples of the tradition he seeks to describe (Jackson, 364).”By technique, Baraka achieves another important goal that is to “challenge the polished ready-made academic poetry as lifeless and socially irrelevant. [It] also challenge[s] the American petty bourgeois lifestyle with their varied versions of mid- twentieth-century American bohemia(Baraka,1991: 150).” Modern poetry, for Baraka, acquires its black identity



through breaking the academic rules best represented by T. S. Eliot and the Avant-garde poets. In his attempt to violate the rules of "Anglo-Eliotic academies" and to break the "Eliot shell" Sollors says:

Baraka was part of a modernist movement; his literary goal was to "restore American poetry to the main-stream of modern poetry after it had been cut off from that tradition by the Anglo-Eliotic domination of the academies." The struggle against Eliot is thus not only a poetic affair, but also a national fight against English domination and for American art as well as a personal battle for liberation from repression. (Sollors : 388-389)

The above mentioned techniques emphasize the innovative nature of Baraka who "feels that his mission is to be as innovative in literature as Charlie Parker in music" by breaking out with the established poetic norms and finding his own literary voice and identity (Ibid,388).

III. Baraka and the Political Challenges

In his essay "Cultural Revolution and The Literary Canon", Baraka states that "any period of sharp social upsurge produces a corresponding arts and cultural movement reflecting the social motion in the arts and culture"(Baraka:151). His statement is a reflection of the changes he experienced on three important levels: personal, ideological, and literary. There are, consequently, certain biographical reasons behind the mood of energetic rebellion in the poetry of Amiri Baraka. Firstly, his parental occupations made him deeply influenced by the popular striping of the black culture, even before the period of his adolescence. He was well aware of the problem of racism and the need to maintain the black's pride inside the American community. Secondly, he enrolled at black Howard University in the fifties of the



twentieth century where he started to observe the scope of the pretensions of black middle class people. In an interview, Baraka talks about the effect of Howard on him saying: "The Howard thing let me understand the Negro sickness . . . They teach you how to pretend to be white"(Lacey:33). That experience was illustrated later on in his recurrent treatment of the "false Negroes" theme in his poetry. Thirdly, after his graduation from Howard, Baraka served in the United States Air Force and started to realize the real situation of the Negroes inside the American community. The Negroes are in and outside that community at the same time. This is the reason behind their real torture. Baraka describes his experience at the Air Force as follows:

". . . the Air Force made me understand the white sickness. It shocked me into realizing what was happening to me and others. By oppressing Negroes, the whites have become oppressors, twisted in the sense of doing bad things to people and justifying them finally, convincing themselves they are right, as people have always convinced themselves."(ibid: 3)

The Air Force experience forced another, more important revelation on Baraka. However, it was during his Air Force years that Baraka began to think seriously of himself as a writer of jazz. Finally, his involvement with the Beat Generation poets who adopted their special energetic techniques of writing in order to turn the heads to the black's need to maintain their pride and to prove their literary profundity, in addition to that, his habitual meeting with jazz poets and musicians at his house during his first marriage, increased his personal sense of alienation and added a general pessimistic tone to his poems; however his poetry changed during the 1960s when he adopted a political revolutionary attitude in his poetry combined with his awareness of the new black activism, coupled with a first hand, almost apocalyptic, experience in post revolution Cuba, all probably ended his cool indifference:



*Lately, I've become accustomed to the way
the ground opens up and envelopes me
Each time I go out and walk the dog.
Or the broad edged silly music the wind
Makes when I run for a bus. . .(Nelson:998)*

The speaker, in these lines, accepts the threatening nature of the modern world. It is a world in which he, the time-bound urban dweller, is prepared to meet lurking death on every street corner. The poet profoundly feels, in this introductory poem, the pressures of the life of convention and respectability. There is the recurring impatience with those forces that bind him to a whole social context. Baraka accepts his place as an obediently black lower-middle-class labourer.

Another example on Baraka's determination to take action for the sake of change and freedom appears in the following lines where the poet appears to urge black people to revolt against the white oppression. In these lines he appears to be a political pamphleteer rather than simply a revolutionary poet because he creates political debates in verse rather than writing poetry as a literary work. He cries against the superiority of the whites in his poems. Poetry, for Baraka, is a good bearer of the black's vision:

*We can change the world
We can struggle against the forces of backwardness
We can change the world, we can struggle against
Ourselves, our slowness, our connection with
The oppressor, the very cultural aggression which
binds us to our enemies as their slaves. (ll.80-85, Nelson:1000)*

Baraka is an unyielding Negro who knocks down the system, as Olaniyan affirms, since he breaks the established boundaries between literary and non-literary



works (Olaniyan, 1995:69). His jazz poems are marked by the element of "decrudin" which is a process of refusing subjectivity and the attempt at reforming it" I make a poetry with what I feel is useful & can be saved out of all the garbage of our lives" (Ibid:71). Baraka's desire to make literary language reaches beyond itself into a realm of political confrontation and social transformation presenting poetry of immediate action and concrete effect. Baraka states in "How You Sound??" that:

MY POETRY is whatever I think I am
... There cannot be anything I must fit
the poem into. Everything must be
made to fit into the poem. There must
not be any preconceived notion or
design for what the poem ought to be.
"Who knows what a poem ought to
sound like? Until it'sthar." Says
Charles Olson ... & I follow with that.
(Lee:371)

Given his understanding of himself and of his world, this is the lure, the compelling attraction from which the poet must divorce himself. The poet accepts the threatening nature of the modern world. However, the limits of Baraka's revolution go beyond the white borders to reach the black. Baraka, like Langston Hughes, severely attacks black people whose blackness is false and renounces every black who does not accept and embrace his black identity proudly. In his poem "Hymn for Lanie Poo", Baraka reveals the false black façade of his sister. The poet presents her as perfect example of black falseness. She represents the black middle class who are defined and confined by externals. She is a reflection of the bourgeois manners and aspirations which are white in origin. His sister is pictured as a young black beautiful woman who ironically hates everything black. At the beginning of the poem the speaker appears to listen to her warnings:

Beware the evil sun



turn you black
turn your hair
crawl your eyeballs
rot your teeth (Lacy,1981:21)

While the young woman rejects her black identity the poet embraces his enthusiastically. In this way the poet subtly implies that “middle-class blacks direct their repressed hostilities inward toward themselves”. The result is thus “self-hatred, which may appear from their behavior to be directed towards the Negro masses but which in reality is directed against themselves”(Sollors,391). They feel insulted if they are identified as Africans. In the final part of the poem the speaker provide in a prose like manner more details that reveal the true sick personality of his sister when he says:

My sister doesn't like to teach in Newark
Because there are too many colored
In her classes
[...]
Smiling & glad/in
The huge & loveless
White-anglo sun/of
Benevolent step
Mother America (Lacy, 24)

The poetry of Baraka incorporates a political discourse in order to highlight subjects of racism advocated by hostile forces that aim at brutalizing voices of opposition inside the American society. Baraka attempts to revolutionize the consciousness of the African-Americans at different historical times of national crisis and political conflict. His influence by the character of Malcolm X has shaped the language of his poetry which is revolutionary, political and full of energetic and



radical symbols. In an interview with him, Baraka acknowledges the influence of Malcolm X on his writing. He argues that Malcolm X, who was a prominent member of the Black Muslim Movement, rose with his ideas that violated white supremacy and imperialism. His message of self-defense, self-respect and self-determination was influential on black people at that time, including Baraka who considers that Malcolm X was a great leader.

Baraka's poetry flourished at a time that witnessed changes on the socio-political sides that deeply influenced the black people inside the American society; consequently, Baraka's poetry became a weapon that aimed to brutalize those black's to challenge the repressive forces. Baraka relies mainly on the poor black people in his struggle against the oppressors, as a result of the pain and agony they live in. Their voice is distinctive expressing their hope of a better change. In 2003 Baraka published "Somebody Blew UP America" one of the most controversial poems in his career right after September 11th attacks. The publication of this poem aroused an unmatched hostile wave of criticism against both the poet and the poem. Critics considered Baraka racial, anti-Semitic, and traitor. Defending himself and his poem Baraka declared that his idea behind writing this poem was to show:

how Black Americans have suffered from domestic terrorism since being kidnapped into US chattel slavery, e.g., by Slave Owners, US & State Laws, ... denial of rights, national oppression, racism, character assassination, historically, and at this very minute throughout the US". The poem, he continues, speaks against "white supremacy ... as the most terrifying form of Imperialism and its attendant national oppression". It is white supremacists who have exploited, and continue to exploit, "the colored peoples". It is they, in fact, according to Baraka, who are "the most dangerous terrorists in the world!". The passages containing references to Israeli nationals, he argues, form only a part of an extended litany of interrogations about



different kinds of racism directed against various minority groups throughout history, including Jews. (Gwiazda, 466)

It appears very clear that Baraka is not only defending black people but the ethnic and religious minorities as well. Baraka in this poem uses a long series of questions to explore a very long list of historical events such as wars, revolutions, and racial riots. The poet, furthermore, questions the bloody nature of man. In fact, he blames the attacks on the white American government and alleges that the American government knew that such attacks would take place on the American soil. In the following quoted lines, Baraka's reference to the alleged involvement of the Zionist government in the attacks is not by any means directed to attack the Jews.

*Who knew the World Trade Center was gonna get
bombed*

*Who told 4000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers
To stay home that day*

Why did Sharon stay away? (Gwiazda,2004:465)

Through these lines Baraka states that oldZino- Anglican union led to these terrible attacks. He considers that these attacks reveal the political and security failure of the American administration. Some of Baraka's poems incorporate attacks to the white and black people of the high classes as well as the American presidents whom he considers the symbols of the oppressing regime. In his poem "Black Magic" published in 1969 he says:

*President Johnson is a mass murderer
And his mother was a mass murderer*

Then he says:

He has Negroes work for him hate him



Wish him under the bullets of Kennedy death (Gohar:23)

Although Baraka adopted a satirical and critical attitudes towards different white American presidents, he wrote his free jazz poem "Ode To Obama" shortly after the election of president Barak Obama sympathizing with him for the heavy burden that he has to carry especially that he is surrounded by those whites who may increase the difficulty of his duty as a president to the United States and all this positivity is destined to be destroyed by some TROLL who turns it into a race war:

lost; misdirected; they ain't who they is

blind like in Spanish cannot see seese, as if race was a waste--it is;

you think you could survive amongst this hostile tribe;

What's happening Prez (U-tube)

In an interview with Baraka shortly after Obama's election, he announces his wishes that US becomes a communist country since "it is really the perfect system", he adds US is no real democracy but Obama wants to make it one. Baraka hopes that Obama's administration will lead US to nationalization which is a step towards a more fair society. Amiri Baraka is a man and a poet who devoted his life and literature to attack racism views Barak Obama as the only savior of America.

Conclusion

Amiri Baraka, to conclude, tries to establish a black world in his writing. He uses art as a medium of free expression and vitality. Art, for him, is no more a realm of beauty and aesthetics, it is an effective weapon of social change. His writing flourished at a period which was charged with racial discrimination, riots and violence, underwent rapid social, political, ideological, and economical changes. It is normal, therefore, to see the impact of such changes reflected in his character. Baraka's voice is a true



representation of the black authenticity and Afro-centerism since he carried the message of creating an ideal black world.

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