

Racial Politics In Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman***Author 1:****C. Chandrasekaran**PhD Research Scholar
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Tamil Nadu, India.**Abstract**

Amiri Baraka's well-known and widely praised and criticized play, *Dutchman*, is a prime example of Revolutionary Theater, which Baraka defines as theatre that "forces" its audience to confront social injustice and "accuses" and "attacks" its practitioners. The *Dutchman* is a model text for Baraka's urge to destroy through art in this way. The prevalent view in the literature on this play reduces Clay and Lula to victims and perpetrators, according to this essay. This article seeks to portray these characters as more multifaceted and less stereotypical from a postmodernist perspective. As a result, individuals might be considered to have the ability to change as well as the ability to destroy themselves and/or society. In the end, Baraka's *Dutchman* is a true work of Revolutionary Theater: strong, accusing, and devastating.

Keywords: Theater, Techniques, Postmodernism, Black Arts, Rereading, and Repositioning

The *Dutchman* is a controversial drama full of allusions, images, and symbols that call into question the social status of black people in twentieth-century North America. While *The Dutchman* appears to have a simple plot with only two major characters and a particular place, the play, as this article will show, presents the audience with a hard journey packed with varied meanings and tremendous political ramifications. *The Dutchman* must be regarded as a representation of the Black Arts movement, which was intertwined with Black Power politics. As Larry Neal argues:

Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to accomplish this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. The Black Arts and the Black Power concepts both relate broadly to the Afro-American desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics.

(55)

Thus, in *Dutchman*, Baraka attacks western cultural codes by revising, rephrasing, rewriting, and, if necessary, demolishing them, because the Black Arts movement thought that they should be destroyed: "it was impossible to construct anything meaningful within western culture's decaying structure" (Neal 55). Baraka's importance and impact on the movement were crucial, according to Neal, who positions him as the movement's leader, "prime mover, and chief designer" of the Black Arts concept.

The play revolves around a fortuitous encounter between Clay, a black subway commuter, and Lula, a white elderly woman. Their initial interaction on the train is charming, but as time goes by, the lady becomes hostile, accusing, and seductive. Lula ultimately stabs the young guy to death, bringing the drama to a close. Clay is tossed out of the subway by the other white passengers after he dies at the hands of Lula. Lula is prepared to find the next black man to seat next to as the play finishes on a dark note.

The Dutchman, Amiri Baraka, won the Obie Award in 1964. He was a successful writer before converting to Islam and changing his name to Imamu Amiri Baraka. "working, writing, and publishing in Greenwich Village as Le Roi Jones both for and from within a white system of power [that] he ultimately attempted to subvert" (Kern 2). As his political career progressed, he became "an aggressive black nationalist and black art aesthician" (Reid 44), and his acute awareness of the political purpose of the art he produced led to many accounts of the role of art in politics.

Thus, his works of art have been understood as an aesthetic means to elucidate political ends. Over time, Baraka's political views and involvement in Black Politics shifted; by the 1970s, he had become a very strong left-wing Marxist. His life and attitude have been a source of inspiration for his community, in particular. His famous essay, *The Revolutionary Theatre*, The New York Times rejected it in 1964 because the editors couldn't comprehend it, according to reports at the time. The essay was also rejected by the Village Voice for identical reasons. It was finally published in Black Dialogue (*TRT* 1). The paper acts as a critical record of his personal views on what art is and how it should function. This paper will be informed by the ideas presented in his essay.

The Revolutionary Theatre, according to Baraka, is "... a weapon to help in the slaughter of these dimwitted fat-bellied white guys who somehow believe that the rest of the world is here for them to slobber on" (2). Thus, in this sense, Baraka's plays, as well as his poetry and writings, must be viewed as tools for not merely undermining but actively opposing white hegemony in art and life. As an aesthete of art, Baraka declares:

The Revolutionary Theatre should force change: it should change. (All their faces turned into the lights and you worked on them black nigger magic and cleansed them after having seen the ugliness. And if the beautiful see themselves, they will love themselves. We are preaching virtue again, but by that I mean NOW, toward what seems to be the most constructive use of the word. (TRT 1)

His first and most essential notion about *The Revolutionary Theatre* is that it should compel change, since, at the time the article was written, change was not only desirable but also required due to the severe prejudice that black Americans faced in American culture. Racial segregation robbed black residents of basic human rights and caused them to be systematically disenfranchised, ignored, and hated in society. In other words, they were subjected to physical, systemic, and psychological violence in a variety of ways. These terrible and inhumane circumstances forced them to have a poor image of themselves; most of them lost their self-esteem and were taught that their lives were not worth as much as white people's. Clay's position, as well as other black subjects' positions and conduct, may be understood via Frantz Fanon's theories on black subjects and their places in white cultures.

Fanon's well-known book *Black Skins, White Masks*, delves into the psyche of black people and is regarded as one of the issue's foundations. In the foreword to the 2008 version,

Sardar says in the foreword that the book examines: "how colonialism is internalized by the colonized, how an inferiority complex is inculcated, and how, through the mechanism of racism, black people end up emulating their oppressors" (Fanon x). Imitation and imitation, which eventually led to assimilation, may be seen as a duty rather than a choice since some people feel compelled to change in order to be accepted in society. Baraka's work exposes the folly of such a position; for Baraka, black replication of white notions is a trap that eschews self-determination and undoes political progress; instead, it perpetuates issues.

Baraka wrote plays, poetry, and articles that highlighted terrible racism and the punishing reality of black culture, using his art as a tool, a "weapon." As a result, his writings have sparked debate, resulting in them being extensively read as well as widely criticized. Some reviewers have praised his work as revolutionary, while others have chastised him for being divisive and inflaming racial tensions. For example, Nita N. Kumar describes Baraka's position as an activist as an "aggressive and un-yielding antiwhite position" and writes that in Baraka's works, "the white world is repeatedly described as evil, sick, and dying, and the creation of a positive black consciousness is crucially linked to the declaration of white culture as evil and insane" (272).

Smith also states, "Baraka's career has been a persistent chronicle of controversies, most of them having been provoked by Baraka's own deliberately incendiary polemics" (235). In his autobiography, Baraka also confronts the critiques levelled against him and his playwriting, for which he was called "foul-mouthed," "full of hatred," and "furious, angry"; nevertheless, he asserts, "the play had made its mark" (A 276). The fact that he was able to

reach an audience, deliver his message, and stimulate debate within his confines justified the means.

The play *The Dutchman* is Baraka's most well-known and popular work. In his own words, the *Dutchman* blames, compels, and tries to eliminate various elements of white hegemony, an inclination he claims is one of *Revolutionary Theater's* major purposes. Intertextuality is used by Baraka in the play to enable him to develop humorous language and to imply that the play has several layers. In this way, the play does not favour a single, stable, or consistent interpretation. Using Bakhtin as a starting point, Julia Kristeva gave one of the early elucidations of the consequences of using intertextuality inside texts. Kristeva contends that "what appears to be a lack of rigor is, in fact, an insight first introduced into literary theory by Bakhtin: any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (37).

Thus, all literary and non-literary writings, according to Kristeva, are interconnected;

they refer to, conclude from, and rewrite one another, and they are continually engaging with prior texts. As a result, texts can never be genuinely unique since nothing can be said that hasn't previously been said, and every text will and does have relationships with previous texts, replicating and altering them in the process of reading and writing (300).

Alfaro elaborates on the theory; "the theory of intertextuality insists that a text cannot exist as a self-sufficient whole, and so, that it does not function as a closed system" (268). As Zengin states, "intertextuality's approach to text and its meaning is a poststructuralist and

postmodernist one, with its emphasis on the interdependence of texts and on the unstable sliding meaning of the text changing through reworking of earlier texts" (317).

Many have noted the instability of concrete meanings indicated by the employment of postmodernist methods like intertextuality as proof of postmodernism's political impetus towards the deconstruction of existing hierarchies. If *Dutchman* is a pioneer in the use of postmodernist methods, its themes of racial injustice and brutality have long been staples of postmodern fiction. When seen through postmodern spectacles, it's easy to claim that the book creates various interpretations since neither the author nor the characters are trustworthy; in fact, as we can see, their actions, words, and manners frequently deceive.

Literary references, symbolism, and mythologies abound in the play. To begin with, the play's title is significant, since it alludes to the legend of the *Flying Dutchman* in which a cursed captain is stuck aboard his ship and cannot reach land until the end of time. Willard Hallam Bonner outlines the many variants of the *Flying Dutchman* story in the following way:

A Dutch sea captain, Vanderdecken, is condemned by the Devil to beat futilely and forever around the Cape of Good Hope because he once swore a blasphemous oath that he would round the Cape if it took him till Doomsday. [...] He is allowed to visit the shore once in a long while (though it is every seven years in Wagner's opera of 1843), often for the purpose of wooing a bride. He fails and is condemned to return to his ocean wanderings, usually with a spectacular sinking of both ship and captain into the sea. (283)

Conclusion

The racial politics of the *Dutchmen* become strikingly strong when viewed via postmodern perspectives. We may reread, analyze, and uncover new points of view on the seemingly simple storyline by comprehending the intertextual allusions in the play and applying Derrida's concept of "play of contrasts." As a political artist, Baraka thinks that art should compel its audience to examine their own attitudes and complicities about race and gender, and in *Dutchman*, he does just that. The viewer is burdened with dramatic duty by the imminent doom of a new character, which is given at the conclusion.

The moral implications of an America built on racial violence and gender discrimination are not lost on any of the characters in the play, nor on the audience. Through his art, Baraka hopes to elicit change in people, to promote knowledge, and arouse consciousness. This connects his viewpoint with Lula's in many respects. While many detractors have viewed Lula as a one-dimensional figure who perpetuates numerous conventional gender stereotypes, this article suggests that Lula's role is more nuanced. Rather than being only a temptress, seductress, or provocateur, she is yet another victim of a patriarchal and racist society. As a result, Lula and Clay both turn out to be *Dutchman* characters; both are victims, and it is nearly impossible for them to escape this vicious loop without the help of others.

Finally, given the societal constraints put on the characters, Lula's final deed, which culminates in Clay's death, may seem almost perversely natural. Lula prods Clay from the start to stand up to the bullying that society inflicts on him, but he refuses to protect himself. Lula's efforts to develop consciousness, aspirations, and dreams were not realized, making him a failure as well. Through Lula, Baraka attempts to construct this identity. However,

Lula's failure clarifies for her that Clay's existence means nothing to himself, to her, or to his race. Her failure and his are locked together, and thus her fate are sealed. Lula's failure, on the other hand, shows her that Clay's presence matters nothing to him, her, or his species. Her failure is inextricably linked to his, sealing his doom.

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