

SYMBOLISM AND RACE IN AMIRI BARAKA'S *DUTCHMAN*

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ABSTRACT: *Theatre is one of the means by which different cultures both proclaim and question themselves. It is constantly connected with the broad forces of insurrection and rituals in different societies. Starting from the beginning of the previous century theatre has developed as a practice with which to rethink gender, violence, ethnicity, identity and arts. Racial thinking and modern stage interact to reset an understanding of race and turn individual experiences into art. Amiri Baraka's Dutchman (1964) is the study of a culture of white supremacy that has historically marginalized all other races, presenting some possible consequences. In an attempt to combat the deep rooted problem of racial discrimination in the American society, Baraka tries to examine and analyze the psyche behind it.*

KEYWORDS: Race, violence, culture, discrimination

INTRODUCTION

Amiri Baraka (1934-2014), previously known as LeRoi Jones and Imamu Amear Baraka, is a black American dramatist, essayist, poet, music critic, novelist and co-founder of the Black Arts Movement. He explores the freedom and equality denied to black Americans. Racial tensions and violence in contemporary America are depicted in several of his plays, like *Dutchman* which was first presented on the Cherry Lane Theatre in New York in March, 1964. The play, which was published under his first name, LeRoi Jones, exposes race relations and, thus, is considered an outstanding example of the Black Arts movement. Baraka is one of the most controversial writers and is regarded by some people as a hero who advocates racial equality through depicting violence between races, while others regard him as a racist and accuse him of anti-semitism due to his expression of hatred between some races. Due to the formation of the Black Arts Movement and writing an essay called "The Revolutionary Theatre" (1965), he is accused of publicizing white suppression and advocating violence.

Baraka is considered an icon of revolt against the American white racist society. He was also against America's foreign policy as he explained in his poem "Somebody Blew up America" (2001), which was criticized for anti-semitism and its attack on public figures. In this poem, which was written after the 11 September terrorist attack, Baraka denounces the claim of American politicians that it was Al-Qaeda terrorist organization that attacked New York, blew up the towers and killed more than 3000 civilians. Baraka states that people with benefits: capitalist groups, corrupt politicians, arms dealers and oil companies caused the 11 September attack. The poem led

to a strong wave of criticism, accusations and protest against Baraka from both critics and audiences.

Different forms of Afro-American literature: poetry, fiction and drama share the need to preserve the national black identity and denounce marginalization of black men who only demand freedom, equality and the right of life. *Dutchman* is a dramatic expression that examines the history of the blacks-whites relation in American society and culture. It is Baraka's message to black Americans to stand for themselves and to create their own identity and culture.

Dutchman is set in a subway train where the two main characters, Lula and Clay, meet. During their talk Lula seduces and then mocks Clay for accepting the standards of the white society and suppressing his black identity. Clay brushes her off declaring that he does not need her approval. Infuriated, Lula stabs Clay to death, then orders the subway passengers – who were passively watching – to throw the body off the train and they comply. Another black man boards the train at the next stop and Lula repeats the same pattern of seduction. The play is an extended metaphor of the flirtatious temptation and the subsequent murder of Clay, a twenty-year-old black American, by Lula, a thirty-year-old white woman. The words of Lula – as a representative of white Americans – symbolically act out the different patterns of history; her lines are contrasted with Clay's innocent and naïve responses that reflect his slave mentality. The metaphorical subway journey taken by Lula, Clay and the silent passengers mirrors a racist society speeding toward genocide (symbolized by the murder of Clay). The play, thus, denotes the genocidal nature of white races and urges black men to stand against any form of abuse, symbolized by Lula's masochistic act.

The play reveals the hatred and anger directed towards the white American society in a myth-like story. The mythic quality of the play is revealed in the initial stage directions: "*In the flying underbelly of the city steaming hot, and summer on top, outside. Underground. The subway heaped in modern myth*" (p. 3). The words "underground" and "myth" suggest that the play depicts a myth, just like the racial discrimination over a long period of time; this is enhanced by a reference to the fall of Adam and Eve (Lula's apple), indicating man's original sin. Other elements in the play may be symbolically interpreted: the paper books that Lula carries symbolize white man's culture, and her sunglasses symbolize her disguise of friendship while hiding her true self which appears only at the end of the play but is hinted at by the description of the sunglasses as being pushed "up on her forehead from time to time" (p. 6). Moreover, she carries apples which are the classic symbol of temptation; this also renders Clay an Adam figure who learns the lesson in an uneasy way. The knowledge of good and evil always brings death, just like discovering the falsehood of the promises offered by the white society to the black man. Baraka in this play explores the anger of the African Americans against the age-old sufferings of racism. The way Lula destroys Clay symbolizes the white man's savage destruction of the cultural identity of black people. The play, thus, illustrates the continuity of the racial violence that was rampant in America in the sixties of the twentieth century in particular.

Dutchman explores the black-white tension that exists in the American society which still suffers from racial discrimination. Although believing in oneself is Baraka's message to black men, he cleverly succeeds in mirroring their uneasiness and segregation in social life. Due to racial oppression and the common insecurity among the blacks, the only means left to establish an identity and affirm black nationalism is through spurning everything that is related to the white racist culture, heritage and way of life while, at the same time, embracing everything that is black. The national outcome of racial oppression, contempt, hatred and alienation is violence. To establish their own identity, the blacks need to revolt against the white culture and identity imposed on them by white society.

The dialogue between Lula and Clay reflects Baraka's idea of the relationship between black and white Americans: a slave-master relationship. Lula, from the very beginning, tries constantly to make Clay feel guilty, especially when she accuses him, at the beginning of their conversation, of staring at her body, which is her first step to manipulate and intimidate him. However, Clay's reply: "Oh boy. Wow, now I admit I was looking in your direction. But the rest of that weight is yours" (p. 7) indicates that the whites, in general, are the ones who should feel guilty: guilt is the weight of white people. Lula's manipulative seduction symbolizes white man's attempts to compensate black people due to their guilt. Lula informs Clay that she went out of her way to find him: "going some other way... searching you out" (p. 7). Clay, however, does not understand the denotations of her words so she tells him: "God, you're dull" (p. 7), thus, triggering his defense mechanism, especially that she keeps talking in riddles and mocking him. Her words: "You look like death eating a soda cracker" (p. 8), symbolize the attitude of white society towards the blacks. *Soda cracker* in black dialect means *white man*, which sums up the white-black historical relation. This is also enhanced by Lula's words: "I lie a lot. [Smiling] It helps me control the world" (p. 9). Lula continues her mockery and laughter at Clay, while he keeps humouring her which mirrors the reaction of black slaves to their white masters in American history. That is why Lula's laughter is gentle as long as she is in control, and more gentle when Clay humours her saying "that's right" (p. 10). Lula's offer of apples – the symbol of seduction – parallels her laughter, both reflect historical racism when Clay's sex-slave black ancestors used to be a source of amusement to their white masters. Clay naively accepts the next apple without realizing Lula's intentions of making him more aware of his position in society. Moreover, Lula's sarcasm when she ridicules his manhood calling him "Mister Man" echoes the common traditional difficulty for white man to accept a black slave as an adult: "Would you like to get involved with me, Mister Man?" (p. 11). Lula also reflects the inability of white man to accept the presence of a worthy culture or any beauty in any race other than his own. This is apparent when she tells Clay that a black man like him "could be a handsome man" (p. 13). Clay can do nothing but agree to the words of – what is indicated to be – his slave master. Clay, furthermore, passively accepts being referred to by Lula as a woman. This symbolizes the blacks' traditional role and heritage as sex slaves, of which Clay is fully aware:

Lula: Why not be a friend of Warren's? Why not? [Taking his arm] Have you asked me yet?

Clay: How can I ask you when I don't know your name?

Lula: Are you talking to my name?

Clay: What is it, a secret?

Lula: I'm Lena the Hyena.

Clay: The famous woman poet?

Lula: Poetess! The same!

Clay: Well, you know so much about me ... what's my name?

Lula: Morris the Hyena.

Clay: The woman poet?

Lula: The same. [Laughing and going into her bag] You want another apple?

(p. 14)

Lula's laughter and her continuous offer of another apple symbolize her reward to Clay for knowing his position in white man's society, the generosity which is but ruinous. The discrimination between black man and white man is further symbolized by the names that Lula and Clay mention to one another:

Lula: Clay? Really? Clay what?

Clay: Take your pick. Jackson, Johnson, or Williams.

Lula: Oh, really? Good for you. But it's good to be Williams. You're too pretentious to be a Jackson or Johnson.

(p. 15)

To keep Clay submissive, Lula, not only intensifies her promises of a possible integration between them, but she also implies that he is unable to please her: "Everything you say is wrong" (p. 18). She goes further to criticize the blacks in general: "Did your people ever burn witches or start revolutions over the price of tea? Boy, those narrow-shoulder clothes come from a tradition you ought to feel oppressed by. A three-button suit. What right do you have to be wearing a three-button suit and striped tie? Your grandfather was a slave, he didn't go to Harvard" (p. 18). Lula reminds Clay of his roots of servitude so as not to aspire to look like the whites or be deceived by their promises; this is symbolized by the word "boy" which contradicts her offer of involvement. Moreover, the name *Clay* symbolizes the easily shaped and moulded quality of black identity, which is still not to a satisfying form that pleases the whites. Lula tells Clay that may "the people accept you as a ghost of the future. And love you, that you might not kill them when you can" (p. 21). However, Clay is ignorant of the fact that the truth is the opposite: it is Lula who is the murderer but she says the opposite: "You're a murderer, Clay, and you know it" (p. 21).

Scene two opens – as indicated in stage directions – "*the same as before, though now there are other seats visible in the car. And throughout the scene other people get on the subway*" (p. 22). The fact that Clay's first line is "The Party!" indicates that it is just hypothetical, and Lula's following lines reveal how she fantasizes their future relationship, which, ironically, is from a white person's point of view. The party she describes is but an assertion of a slave-master relationship. She describes how everyone will pretend during the party and then they will "go down the street, late night, eating apples and winding very deliberately toward my house" (p. 22). When Clay asks: "Deliberately?", Lula refers to a Jewish Buddhist" that they might meet and who – from some whites' point of view is but a parallel to Clay and deserves the same contempt. This is Baraka's means to widen the scope of white man's racism to include other races and ethnicities. It is indicated that these races and ethnic groups are equally disdained and share the same fate of

genocide if they attempt to deny their subordination. Lula's destructive spirit might be the result of white man's guilt carved in his psyche or his belief that the death of the blacks is the natural outcome of their attempt to deny their black identity in order to be part of the white society. This is symbolized in the following dialogue:

Lula: ... I lead you in, holding your wet hand gently in my hand...

Clay: Which is not wet?

Lula: Which is dry as ashes.

Clay: And cold?

Lula: Don't think you'll get out of your responsibility that way. It's not cold at all.

(p. 25)

The same fate of death faces black man when he also tries to blend in white culture. Thus, black man is doomed to death in all cases: if he argues for separation from the whites and advocates his black nationalism or if he attempts to ignore his black identity and blend in and, thus, he will be offering himself as a sacrifice to the white master and feeding the genocidal instinct in the white psyche. That is why Lula constantly mocks Clay's attempt to become part of the white culture and ominously laughs at his self-ignorance when he does not understand the connotations of her words. Several ominous words are mentioned in this scene, foreshadowing the final murder, like "grave", "ashes", "tomb" and "morbid (p. 27). This ominous foreshadowing is intensified when more people enter the train symbolizing the American masses who passively witness discrimination and are sometimes summoned to participate in it. Lula, later, summons them as her allies to get rid of Clay's body: "*More people come into the train. They come closer to the couple... staring at the two with uncertain interest*" (p. 29):

Clay: Wow. All these people, so suddenly. They must all come from the same place.

Lula: Right. That they do.

Clay: Oh? You know about them too?

Lula: Oh yeah. About them more than I know about you. Do they frighten you?

Clay: Frighten me? Why should they frighten me?

Lula: 'Cause you're an escaped nigger.

Clay: Yeah?

Lula: 'Cause you crawled through the wire and made tracks to my side.

Clay: Wire?

Lula: Don't they have wire around plantations?

(p. 29)

Lula's words denote the common white American conviction that any black man is an "escaped nigger" until his extermination becomes essential. Lula goes further to mock black dance and music (the blues) in a hysterical way. Nevertheless, her words reflect white man's guilt of dehumanizing the blacks and considering them sex slaves. Clay, however, does not get angry although he is embarrassed, which reflects black man's heritage of humiliation and the slave psyche.

When Clay refuses to join Lula in the dirty dance, she becomes angry, mocks and insults him even further till he is finally enraged. His rage is intensified when she tells him "You're afraid of white

people. And your father was Uncle Tom Big Lip” (p. 33)! Thus, he “*slaps her as hard as he can, across the mouth... Lula’s head bangs against the back of the seat. When she raises it again, Clay slaps her again*” (p. 33). He, then, foolishly, threatens to murder her and tells her that he could kill her and any of the passengers on the spot but he keeps himself from cutting their throats. Clay, thus, oversteps the limits of the racial white society and deserves punishment. He is unaware of the extent to which Lula/ white man will go to maintain her/his dominance.

Clay’s following long speech discloses black man’s rage and hatred of white people. He symbolically criticizes Lula as an embodiment of the whole white society. His words reveal that black man’s dance and blues music are his substitute for murder and they develop from black man’s hatred of white people. Instead of killing all the whites, black people, through their art - that is totally foreign to the whites, like the blues music and the belly rub dancing - attempt to create an identity of their own, even if only an image of white man. This is black man’s means to cope in an unfriendly culture of powerful majority. He tells Lula that “Belly rub is not Queens. Belly rub is dark places with big hats and overcoats held up with one arm. Belly rub hates you...” (p. 35). Clay’s threat is ironic because the end result of colonization may vary. It is not usually the oppressed (black man) who kills the oppressor (white man), sometimes the oppressor resolves to violence to impose and maintain his superiority.

Instead of asserting his manhood, Clay, through his declaration of being non-violent, ironically made himself the perfect victim. He has no idea that Lula is a killer but, by the end of his speech, he realizes his deeply buried hatred for the whites. Nevertheless, he tells Lula that there is no need for her to go on acting out the previous performance that does not reflect her true nature and in which she involved him: "Looks like we won't be acting out that little pageant you outlined before ... Sorry, baby, I don't think we could make it" (p. 36). Lula confirms his statement, and, since role playing has ended and he was about to get off the train, she stabs him twice while he was reaching for his books. Clay's attempt to reach for his books symbolizes his final attempt to retrieve his lost identity and the Afro-American culture. His murder, as Baraka indicates, is symbolic of the punishment that any black person gets when he stands against or rejects the superiority and dominance of white man and an indication of the impossibility of black and white integration. Upon Lula's call, the previously unconcerned passengers cooperate to "Open the door and throw his body out ... And all of you get off at the next stop" (p. 37). The teaming up of the passengers symbolizes the collaboration and unity of white man in standing against the authority-resisting blacks.

The structure of the play, the setting (subway) and the order of character appearance (another black man and an old black conductor come into the coach and greet one another) symbolize the progression of life and time. As the play illustrates, the subway, like the Dutchman - the legendary ghost ship - will continue going and the incidents will be repeated as long as the blacks allow the dominance and control of the whites. The indication that Lula may get acquainted with the other young black man and then murder him symbolizes the continuity of the genocide of the blacks. However, Baraka's message here is that this is not the end. The young man who comes into the coach with books under his arm symbolizes black evolution. He is the opposite of the conductor

who symbolizes the pre-Clay stage before enlightenment which the young black man symbolizes. Although Clay had books among his belongings, he was actually reading a magazine at the beginning of the play; however, the young black man who appeared towards the end of the play – as indicated in stage directions – is, in fact, reading one of the books that he was carrying under his arms. Thus, as Baraka suggests, the young black man who boards the train towards the end of the play symbolizes consciousness, exceeding Clay's stage of ignorance of the genocidal nature of the whites. It is also indicated in the stage directions that the conductor is on the way out of the car, which symbolizes hope of a better future and indicates that the blacks will no longer be deceived. It is through a new black intellect that the blacks will be able to prevent white man's racism from developing into genocide, which will save the whites from becoming like the crew of the Dutchman, the legendary ghost ship, who were doomed to sail the oceans for eternity for defying nature.

The psychological and physical violence dominates Baraka's vision of American culture. Through the action of the play, Baraka emphasizes the impossibility of integration between the blacks and whites in a racist society; in other words, the play is a sociopolitical protest against racism. That is why it is often interpreted as a mytho-symbolic parable of the myth of the Flying Dutchman. The captain of the Dutchman, according to the myth, was struggling to round the Cape of Good Hope during a raging storm. He is said to have cursed God and the elements of nature and swore that even if he had to sail until doomsday he would succeed. As a result, he was condemned to sail the oceans forever without being able to make port. Within the symbolic structure of the play, white America (symbolized by Lula) is like the captain and the crew of the Dutchman ship who were condemned for defying nature. White America is condemned for the blasphemy of racism and long history of slavery, and the country is cursed to experience its current guilt by constantly getting engaged in a series of violent deeds of racism.

Dutchman is written purely from a black person's perspective. It stresses the necessity of maintaining the identity of black culture, since integration with the racist white culture – symbolized by the sexual integration between Clay and Lula – while accepting their superiority – symbolized by Clay's cold response to Lula's racist insults – will end in the loss of identity of the blacks – symbolized by the death of Clay. That is why Lula tells Clay in scene one: "You're a murderer, Clay, and you know it" (p. 21), her words imply that accepting integration with the whites or aspiring to it is a murder of the black identity, especially that black man will never be assimilated or accepted into white culture. Therefore, it is easy for Lula to manipulate Clay throughout the play, and then kill him in cold blood at the end of it. Clay's history of slavery and Lula's history of oppression can never be shaken off or united together. The play explores the blacks and whites' cultural psyche and stresses the need for a sense of a new order within society. Theatre, constantly, serves as a place that presents performances that reflect social, cultural and racial concerns. Several black playwrights use stage to present and discuss black culture, experience and identity; through their plays, they create characters with diverse perspectives offering critical consideration of different experiences related to race so as to encounter different cultural, social and ideological concepts. The aim is to consider the possibility of black self-

identification in racist cultures, especially after 1960, the year that witnessed race riots in U.S. cities during the spring and summer of 1967, like the Tampa Bay Race Riot.

The concept of race is so deep-rooted in American culture and society that it is difficult to imagine its closure. Nevertheless, plays that discuss race provide a clear-eyed understanding of the legacy of racial discrimination and black-white violence within society. The aim is to realize the all-time need to embody race since the role of theatre in general is to address concerns about racial and ethnic differences. Through his plays, Baraka paved the way for black playwrights to continue along the path of mirroring and analyzing race and national identity, like Branden Jacobs-Jenkins who wrote *Neighbors* (2011) depicting the experience of a group of black actors moving into a white neighbourhood. Another example is Antoinette Nwandu who depicts the effects of police violence against the blacks in her play *Pass Over* (2017) about two young black men struggling to survive, and *Breach* (2018) describing race in America through the eyes of a black girl. Efforts of black poets, novelists and playwrights still persist in order to deepen the understanding of the facts of the problem of race and racism in America as a step towards its solution.

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