

## **Amiri Barakka's Vision of Black Nation**

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In all his essays and plays the thrust of Baraka's argument is that the Blacks should be proud of being black and that they should strive to rid themselves of the enervating mythical perception of reality induced in them by Whites through systematic propagation of shibboleths which help keep them in their degraded condition. He asserts that believing in what is implied by 'Black is Beautiful' the Blacks will be able to achieve a creative self-hood or an identity matching their expectations as citizens of America.

Baraka's artistic endeavour focuses on the recovery of Black self through the acknowledgement of the ambiguities of history and the necessity of action, even 'violent', to impart meaning to activities in which the 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 work, "Blues People" he presents a treatise on Negro music that considers the history of Black artistic expression as a continuous dialectical movement starting from the inner life of the Blacks through degradation to emergence into a new form answering to the Black aspirations. For Baraka, literature is not an entity that is intended for contemplation but an attempt to make the self-compatible with language in order that it may address itself the crucial issues tormenting the society. In all his plays, Baraka is found probing the ego-centricity that has given rise to various forms of exploitation and repression. "The Revolutionary Theatre" that he has fashioned is to help the Blacks realize liberation through confrontation employing a kind of diction that can articulate unqualified anger. As observed by Benston W. Kimberly:

Baraka, the poet of process dramatist of consciousness-in-transition, concentrates his imagination with unbridled verve and exquisite poise on the present moment without, like other modern writers, seeking to arrest it as a haven in the flux of time. Yet he also has been fascinated and bedeviled by the past, and he often seems uncertain as to whether he should be exorcising it (as in "Slave Ship"), integrating it into his vision (as in "In Our Terribleness"), celebrating it (as in Blues People), or perhaps perpetuating it as kind of warning (as in A Black Mass).<sup>1</sup>

Significantly, Baraka regards historical process as predicated on revolution which makes it obligatory for the individual to come to terms with the postulates of change. Baraka's protagonists view history as a record of rebellion and struggle and they dream of reconciling the past with the present realities which may rid society of humiliations, deceit and subjugation. It may be noted that:

Whatever his ideological position, he has attempted to mold a rhetoric, that enables him to dissolve the difference between history and self - as well as between the different functions of the self (political), natural, artistic) - and so to overcome political disenchantment by revealing himself (in a manner paralleled in our history only by Emerson and Du Bois) as the representative citizen.<sup>2</sup>

The idea spelling out the Black nationalism which came to prominence in 1960's has motivated Black writers like Baraka who are drawn to such distinguished Black leaders like Carmichael who gave a stirring call for 'Black Power' in 1966 and Malcolm X who considered pride in oneself and in the race would be necessary for achieving cultural or political advance. In his essay entitled "The Legacy of Malcolm X, and the Coming of the Black Nation," Baraka

called upon his fellow Blacks to respond to the National Consciousness to which Black culture is to be traced. As observed by Harold Cruse:

with LeRoi Jones and his young Afro-American nationalists,  
anti- interracialism was equated not only  
with anti-whiteness, but with hatred of whiteness.<sup>3</sup>

Baraka demands the restructuring of the Western world which is dependent upon cultural liberation and political power. As pointed out by him:

Black Power movements not grounded in Black culture cannot move beyond the boundaries of Western thought. The paramount value of Western thought is the security and expansion of Western culture. Black Power is inimical to Western culture as it has manifested itself within black and colored majority areas anywhere on this planet. Western culture is and has been destructive to colored all over the world. No movement shaped or contained by Western culture will ever benefit Black people. Black power must be the actual force and beauty and wisdom of Blackness reordering the world.<sup>4</sup>

Commenting on the role of Black art in the regeneration of the Blacks, Baraka observes:

The Art is The National Spirit. That manifestation of it. Black Art must be the Nationalist's vision given more form and feeling, as a razor to cut away what is not central to National Liberation. To show that which is. As a humanistic expression Black Art is a raiser, as a spiritual expression it is itself raised. And these are the poles, out of which we create, to raise, or as raised.<sup>5</sup>

Baraka, indeed, evolved a vision of Black culture and history which could possibly help the creation of the Black Nation. His vision is predicated on 'the symbolic power of the past' which could, perhaps, help in the creation of a national myth that can inspire visionary or revolutionary writers. As observed by him:

A culturally aware black politics would use all the symbols of the culture, all the keys and images out of the black past, out of the black present, to gather the people to it, and energize itself with their strivings at conscious blackness ... Black Power must mean a black people with a past clear back to the beginning of the planet, channeling the roaring energies of black to revive black power Our actual renaissance.<sup>6</sup>

The myth that Baraka is struggling to realize is made up of his own conception of Black culture at the root of which is the Black art which makes for the realization of what may be termed the spiritual moorings of Black Nation. As observed by him:

To create for the universe, reflect blackness and the universe will listen. You must begin with black to begin with the human raising his head above what exists. What exists is dead. It is slow to your eye to fall. But look up one day and it will be gone, and you must not go with it. To create for everything is spirit art. Black Art is the first stepping out our heaven.<sup>7</sup>

Of the elements which have gone into the creation of Baraka's national myth Black culture is one, and prophesy is another. His prophetic statements are informed by his concern for the liberation of the Blacks for the realization of which his proposed Revolutionary Theatre will be of help. It may be noted that Baraka's plays are characterized by the transformation of ironic structures into mythic ones which would demand the employment of a stylistic form of language.

Baraka shares with other Black writers the belief that Black music is at the core of Black ethos which he has spelt out in two of his works, "Blues People" (1963) comprising his

comments on avant-garde Jazz of the 1960's and "Black Music" (1967) which presents an examination of some of the propositions in "Blues People".

It is obvious that Baraka is engaged in exploring the Afro-American as a type of consciousness articulated by a distinct expression characterized by what may be called 'Africaneque emotiveness.' Significantly, Baraka considers the American Negro history as a progressive recovery of an 'archetypal ideal' possible if the Revolutionary Theatre is able to convey a vision of the Afro-American experience validated by history. Baraka views American history as that of an insane power machinations of which has forced the American Blacks to imitate that insanity so as to survive. He feels that the awareness of it which has shaped the Black-White relationships would spur the Blacks to such an action as is necessitated for the realization of their emancipation elucidated by him in his essay, "The Last Days of the American Empire":

To be rational in this insane asylum, where we are held prisoner by the inmates. They want us to be their keepers. Do you Negroes like being keepers for these sadists? But to be rational. Rational men would do something to stop the mad, before they destroy not only the asylum, but the rest of the world. 8

An examination of Baraka's plays from "Dutchman" to "A Recent killing" which figures in the first phase of his career as a dramatist would disclose that he is experimenting with the dramatic form in order to embody his vision of the emergence of a liberated Black Nation.

### Notes

1. "Imamu Amiri Baraka: A Collection of Critical Essays," ed. Benston W. Kimberly (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1978), p.16.
2. Ibid., p.18.
3. Harold Cruse, "The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual" (New York: 1967), p.364.

4. LeRoi Jones, *Raise Race Rays Raze: Essays Since 1965* (New York: Random House, 1971), p.47.
5. *Ibid.*, p.127.
6. *Ibid.*, p.44. *Ibid.*, p.101.
7. *Ibid.*, P. 101
8. LeRoi Jones, *Home: Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow, 1966), p.192.