

The Restoration of the Spirituality of Blackness In" Everett LeRoi Jones's Selected Plays"

By: Dr. Sanaa lazim Hassan Al Ghareeb
College of Education- Wasit university

Abstract:

LeRoi Jones (Imamu Amiri Baraka, 1943-2014) is one of the American literary men whose drama rocked the American stage with its violence and innovative vision. His ups and downs in life as well as his changing political phases formed his theatrical vision and influenced his audience. This research is an attempt to explore his views at a certain era in his career through studying three selected plays; *The Toilet*(1964),*The Slave Ship*(1967),and *The Motion of History*(1977).

بعث الروح الزنجدية في مسرحيات مختارة لايفريت ليروي جونز

د. سناء لازم حسن ال غريب

كلية التربية- جامعة واسط

الملخص:

يعد الشاعر والكاتب ايفريت ليروي جونز (امامو اميري بركة، ١٩٣٤-٢٠١٤) من الادباء الامريكيين المؤثرين في العصر الحديث. حيث اثر بشكل كبير من خلال افكاره ومسرحياته على شريحة واسعة من متابعيه الامريكان من ذوي الاصول الافريقية. يدرس البحث باهتمام كبير تاثير مسرح بركة على الواقع السياسي والاجتماعي خلال حقبة تاريخية محددة.

The Restoration of the Spirituality of Blackness

In" Everett LeRoi Jones's Selected Plays

The events that hit America during the 1960s were a natural and logical result of the social conditions that preceded those years. It was the result of a suffering that lasted for a long time and was mainly caused by racial segregation. This racial segregation was basically directed against the biggest group among the minorities. It was obviously shown in the manner White-Americans dealt with African-Americans. One of the practices that reflected segregation against African-Americans was the Jim-Crow laws. In 1870, Southern legislatures passed laws that ensure the separation of White-Americans from 'persons in colour' in public transportations and schools. The application of these laws was extended to parks, theatres, cemeteries and restaurants. This procedure aimed at prohibiting any sort of contact between the Blacks and Whites as equal individuals of the United States. Jim Crow Laws were practised later in every aspect of life. Jerrald M. Packard states that in South Caroline workers who come from different racial background could not work in the same room, use the same door, or gaze out of the same window. This is especially applicable on Black and White workers. Blacks were not hired by many industries and rules were passed to exclude them by many unions. These laws were legislated and supported in the late 1890s by the Southern states to emphasize racial segregation. Most of the African- Americans accepted the Jim-Crow laws to avoid being victims of a racially motivated violence.

The desperately poor living conditions that African-Americans suffered from in the South resulted in the Great Migration of the early 20th century towards the North. This led to the emergence of Civil Rights Movement to face violence and discrimination against African-Americans. From 1954 to 1968, the movement started to direct all its efforts towards abating racial discrimination against African-Americans, especially in the Southern United States. They started a march to Washington to demand jobs and freedom. This movement was buttoned up by ordinary people who desired change despite the rejection of people in power.

Chester Himes, a Black-American writer views the American society during the 1960s as a hostile environment towards the minorities, especially antagonistic to the black. In his view, the American society of the 1960s demanded of African-Americans a willingness to surrender to a social and institutional racism that is psychologically repressive. This radically repressive atmosphere, accompanied by a

number of disgracing clichéd assumptions about black men resulted in the creation of a social group that considered physical violence and antisocial behaviour a natural response (Fuller 4, 87).

The effects of the events of the 1960s on the American nation were dangerous; the foundation of several groups like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Non-Violent Coordination Committee (SNCC), and the Congress of Racial Equality(CORE) were established to put an end to the problems of segregation against the minorities. Moreover, the assassination of leaders who were highly appreciated and loved by the public among whom are John F. Kennedy, Jr., Malcolm X., Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy started a wave of rage and agony among the minorities. There was also the urban outbreak that started in a number of cities including Watts, California(1965), Detroit, Michigan(1967), and Newark, New Jersey(1967) to support the black revolution and call for equal rights for minorities (Bland 279-280).All this created a highly sensitive environment within the American society.

The difficulties of the 1960s were followed by a more hectic era. With the coming of the 1970s, it seemed that the problem of 'Identity Politics' was not reaching a solution in the near future. It was no longer the problem of the 'black and white' but rather a reflection of the suffering of all the minorities in the American society who endured the difficulties 'all Americans' were facing, yet were denied the privileges 'real Americans' were enjoying.

Everett LeRoi Jones (Imamu Amiri Baraka, 1943-2014) is an American poet, short story writer, novelist, dramatist, critic, and editor. He is considered an influential figure in the development of contemporary Black literature, in addition to being a controversial writer. Being an African-American, he translated his problems and the oppression he faced in the white society in his writings. He also wrote about the persecution of the poor in a capitalist society. Early in his life he was very much influenced by the Beat movement during the 1950s, yet this was not the only philosophy that shaped his work for he started with the Beat and ended with the Marxist- Leninist which he has believed in recently.

During the 1960s, Baraka visited Cuba and this was a changing experience for him. He came to understand that politics and art are inseparable, and that an artist can introduce his politics, spiritual beliefs, and social conventions through his writing. Baraka was not satisfied with the notion art for art's sake; he uses his art to preach the importance of the nationalism of the Black and to put reality as he believes it to be. Around 1966, Baraka's hatred of the Whites peaked. He was asked by a white woman about the possibility of helping the blacks and how can the white help; his answer was simple: "You can help by dying, you are a cancer." In 1968, he converted into Islam and changed his name from Everett LeRoy Jones to Imamu Amiri Baraka which means "blessed spiritual leader". In 1974, another radical shift in Baraka's spiritual development happened when he declined the spiritual title 'Imamu' and announced himself a believer in Marxist-Leninist thought. Baraka rejected the notion of Black Nationalism as a source of racism. He started to advocate socialism as a successful therapy to the problem of minorities in America.

One of the most interesting essays which Baraka wrote in 1966 deals with what he calls 'The Revolutionary Theatre'. He outlines the responsibilities and the goals of what he calls the 'Black Revolutionary Theatre'. He claims that;

The Revolutionary Theatre must Accuse and Attack anything that can be accused and attacked. It must Accuse and Attack because it is a theatre of Victims. It looks at the sky with the victims' eyes' and moves the victims to look at the strength in their minds and their bodies.

The Revolutionary Theatre must take dreams and give them a reality. It must isolate the rituals and historical cycles of reality. But it must be food for all those who need food, and daring propaganda for the beauty of the Human Mind. It is a political theatre, a weapon to help in the slaughter of these dim-witted fat bellied white guys who somehow believe that the rest of the world is here for them to slobber on.

[Baraka,210-15]

For Barak, Ray in *The Toilet* and Walker in *The Slave* are victims. In the western sense they might be heroes, but the revolutionary Theatre is anti-Western; it must show horrible coming influences of the corruption of the West. The theatre must form a power of change. This change forms the corner stone of any play.

On December 16, 1964, Baraka introduced *The Toilet* at St. Mark's Playhouse. Howard Taubman described Baraka as one of the angriest writers and most gifted. (Taubman, 51). In *The Toilet* Black Nationalism is shown in its darkest conditions. Love is seen as an evil thing. The play sets its events in a toilet of a boy's high school. Nearly all of the students are Negro. The talk is latrine language. The group of boys are violent, rough and savage. They expect a fight which is going to happen between one of them and a White boy. The group of Negro boys are united against that boy and his entrance evokes violence.

The Toilet appears to be a documentation of a bullying incident in a high school. Karolis, a white Puerto Rican boy has written a love letter to the head of the Black gang, Foots who is about to beat Karolis to death in the toilet and everybody is excited to attend and share in this event. Action starts off stage and these events are reported to us by members of the gang; Ora, "a short, ugly, crude, and loud" (*The Toilet*, p.23), Willie Love the "tall, thin, and somewhat sensitive," (*The Toilet*, p.23) and Perry the "big, husky, sombre, and cynical," (*The Toilet*, p.24) report to each other that the victim is hiding upstairs in various classrooms as other members of the gang are trying to get him. Almost all the members of the Black gang gather in the toilet and they show off their strength through their acts of urination and other acts that show their sexuality. Their expected attack against Karolis is shown as an act of defence against the White's attempt to deprive the Blacks from their manhood. The fight begins and Karolis is beaten by the gang and the play ends with Ray Foots "weeping and cradling [Karolis head] in his arms." (*The Toilet*, p.29)

The Toilet is violent but ends in a note of tenderness. The events reveal a severe case of dehumanization of this group of boys. The setting of the toilet throughout the play becomes a dominant symbol. It suggests the ugliness and filth of everyday life those boys are living and consequently the social milieu they represent. Lloyd W. Brown suggests that this way of presenting America as a toilet is very much revealing of the quant essence of racism and how victims look at their life. Choosing the toilet as a setting also shows the matching of emotional and physical violence of teenagers whose only way out is through flushing their

psychological shit out. In other words, the filth and redolence represents the offensive personalities of Foots and his gang. Repression seems to be dominant in the play, being trapped in the toilet; it shows the repression of love. Filth as a symbol of corruption and social pollution is very much related to the fact that those boys do not feel their manhood outside, they can express it in the toilet freely but never out of this toilet.

In 1967, Baraka introduced his play *Slave Ship: A Historical Pageant* which is described by critics as “Baraka’s more successful experiments in ritual drama.”(Brown,p.135-65) The play depends mainly on pantomime and sporadic dialogue together with images and dances that reflect the physical and psychological experience of slavery. Physical and emotional violence is portrayed in a series of evocative slave images supported by loud music, dance, with little dialogue and expressive lighting to support a strong emotional response from the audience. Within the play, history shifts from the picture of the slave ship to the contemporary American society. This shift goes unnoticed by the audience as if logical; sitting in the theatre as audience, one’s believes it natural and it is in fact a smooth shift that gives strength and reinforces the subject matter of the play. Manipulating the light on stage forms another point of strength. The theatre is either dark or half- light. The slave’s humming, the African drums, the voices of children and the cries of their mothers and the voice of the master’s whip are all part of the audio-visual effects used by Baraka to support the theme and create realism in the play. Brown argues that the

succession of audio-visual forms is integral to the pattern of ritual upon which Baraka bases his historical pageant. The sights and sounds of the slave ship remain throughout, but they alternate from time with other forms which depict successive stages of the slave holder, the nonviolent civil right movement, and the Black Nationalist movement. (Brown,p19)

During its first production the play provoked different extreme viewpoints and attitudes; critics like Clive Barnes saw the play as an example of black racism;

Every Whiteman, every Blackman, seeing this play is forced to look at himself very carefully in the mirror of his heart. Is black racism less reprehensible than white racism? You cannot possibly see *Salve Ship* without confronting this question, for it is a play that is as much a political statement as a work of art. What are you going to choose? If you are like me

you will perhaps decide that black racism is less reprehensible because it is more understandable. To be brought to a country as a fettered slave is very different from arriving as even the poorest immigrant.(Barnes,p.22)

This preview represents the general atmosphere during the 1960s. White-Americans looked at Black- Americans as enemies and dangerous. A White woman looks at African-Americans as criminals who would rape and kill her. A white man looks at African- Americans as a source of evil and horror. Thus, such a play would surely provoke fear and contradictory feelings in the public. Harold Clurman argues that the play

does not signify “kill all whites!” it implies a situation from which great devastation may ensue. What affected me most, however, was not any ideological pronouncement or triumph of stagecraft; the outstanding factor was the quality of the cast. Some of the players have enough stage experience to do justice to individual roles in other than mass dramas, but here all the actors move together, adjust to one another with a seemingly spontaneous coordination and unity which can be achieved only when a common inspiration of blood and brain, heart and flesh inform the whole. This therefore, a part from any other consideration, is *theatre*.(Clurman,p.125)

Baraka’s metaphorical use of history is cleverly informative in the sense that it gives the audience a clear picture of the reasons of the contemporary situation in America. This argument is produced to the audience through using three dominant images in the play.

The first image identifies the genesis of the problem; slaves are brought to the ship one by one. They are classified according to sex, age, and strength. A Black woman is raped by a White man and the audience can hear her painful cries coming from the dim side of the ship; “...please...please...don’t, don’t, don’t touch me...please, Ifanami, where you? Please, help me... Go...”(S.S. p,136). The trip starts and two classes are identified; the guards who laugh, drink, rape, and enjoy themselves through satisfying their sadistic needs and the slaves downstairs who spend time humming, starving, whipped, and deprived of their humanity.

VOICE I: OK, let's go! A good cargo of black gold. Let's go! We head West! We head West. (Long laughter) Black gold in the West. We got our full cargo.

VOICE II: Aye, Aye, Cap'n. We're on our way. Riches be ours, by God.

VOICE I: Aye, riches, riches be ours. We're on our way. America! (Laughter)

(There is just dim light at top of the set, to indicate where voices are...)

(African Drums. With the swiftness of dance, but running into the heaviness the dark enforces. The drums slow. The beat beat of the darkness. "Where are we, God?" The mumble murmur rattle below. The drone of terror. The voices begin to beat against the dark)

WOMAN I: Ooooooooo, Obatala!

WOMAN II: Shango!

WOMAN I: Ooooooooo, Obatala...

(Children's crying in the hold, and the women trying to comfort them. Trying to keep their sanity, too). (S.S. p.133)

The second image reflects one of the important problems faced slaves which is the separation of family members through selling man and wife apart, separating a brother and sister, etc. "Nostalgic racial memories of the homeland evoke the destroyed identity: male & female pride in their respective chores of home- & war-making, expressed in integral culture: dance, song, prayer." (Brecht, pp.212-19)

The third image reflects revolt. Since history is clearly used as a symbol of the African-American suffering. The play invites this society to bring the oppressed power of the forefathers back, and let anger and the need for self-acceptance and respect talk;

SLAVE I: reverend, what we gon' do when the white man come?

SLAVE II: We gon' cut his fuckin' throat.

SLAVE III: Devil. Beast. Murderer of women and children. Soulless shit eater! (S.S. p.139)

The Black must resist the White's oppression and superiority. They must not submit to his control anymore. Brecht argues that the

final revolt is a genocidal call to arms to the young Afro-American audience – a call for the killing of the White man. But the only enemy killed is a Black man. This may be significant, not only because of the alleged killings of Malcolm X by Black Muslims & of Black Panthers by Karenga's men, but because it suggests that Jone's stress on culture community identity may ultimately override his advocacy of social revolt. There is a symbolic overthrow of Uncle Sam.(Stefan Brecht, pp. 212-19)

In 1977, Baraka produced his play *The Motion of History* which is another play that insists on the importance of theatre and history as a teaching method to invoke social change. This is a fundamental premise of Baraka's socialist drama. For Baraka, socialist drama is important because it is inevitable for the Black Nation to revolt as part of politically enlightening the masses. Literature will create the proper tools by which revolution become easier through depicting the past and its influence on the present.

The Motion of History is a play that encourages the social awareness which will speed up the movement of revolution through the racial lines. Baraka describes it as a vehicle for a simple message; "the only solution to our problems...is revolution! And that revolution is inevitable. *The Motion of History* brings it back through the years, focusing principally on the conscious separation created between black and white workers who are both exploited by the same enemy."(Shannon, pp.425-33)

The play depicts a series of historical sketches from different historical events. The first act reviews scenes from the early Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s in an attempt to criticise the nonviolent protest that was adopted by rebels during that era. Baraka offers a picture of the situation as a means of self-destructiveness due to this policy. The play then describes the ethnic and labour movements of the twentieth century offering a picture of the rebellions throughout the history of the Black enslavement. The motion of history is dramatized on two levels; the historical scenes that present the exploitation of the minorities, especially the Blacks, throughout history in America and revolt as a continuing feature of the society. Lloyd W. Brown argues that the conclusion of the play emphasizes that:

a progressive movement toward the kind of radical change that will dispense with the traditional cycles of continuing repression and abortive rebellion. And by emphasizing history as a progressive force, the play's theme and structure dramatize the "inevitability" of socialist revolution as the culminating result of that progression.(Brown,p.135-65)

The play is written during the socialist phase of the art of Baraka. As in the Black Nationalist phase of his art, Baraka tends to be indulged in a more ideological wish-fulfilment at the expense of social realism. For Baraka it is important to raise consciousness in Black people so that they could see and realize their identity and their position in the White- Man's society. According to Olga Barrios Baraka shows in the play the "need to be born out of the death of past stereotypes created by a system that had undermined African –Americans and their culture."(Barrios,p.47). The importance of Black Nationalism which highly reinforced in *Slave Ship* is replaced by images of the socialist rebellion in America in *The Motion of History*. The American labour Union looked at as an anti-capitalist force that would bring social change.



Black Nationalism represented by *The Toilet* and *Slave Ship*, as well as Socialism which is offered in *The Motion of History* are but attempts to create a spark of revolution through which the spirit of the Black regained. Baraka believes that the potentialities of a one great Black Spirit do exist but it needs a trigger to stimulate it to move. He aims at stimulating this spirit to come to the light to achieve freedom which although granted by law for the Black is absent in their spirit because of the notion of the unknown evil of the dark skin.

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