



## THE DELINEATION OF RACIAL AGITATION : A SCRUTINY OF AMIRI BARAKA'S 'THE DUTCHMAN'

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### ABSTRACT

Baraka, an advocate of Black culture and political power gives expression to violence, misogyny, homophobia and racism in his writings. His play Dutchman is in part responsible for the growth of a genre called Black Literature known as Black Arts Movement.

In Dutchman, Baraka uses theatricality and dynamic characters as a metaphor to portray an honest representation of racist stereotypes in America through both physical and psychological acts of discrimination. An enigma of themes and racial conflicts are blatantly exemplified within the short duration of the play. My paper attempts to analyse how Baraka uses character traits, symbolism and metaphor to exhibit the legacy of racial tension in America.

KEYWORDS: Racism, Black Arts Movement, Discrimination.

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Imamu Amiri Baraka formerly known as LeRoi Jones and Imamu Amear Baraka is the founder of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960's. He was an African-American writer of poetry, drama, fiction, essays and music criticism. He was an advocate of Black culture and political power and his work is often an expression of violence, misogyny, homophobia and racism. Baraka's first published work was a play A good girl (1988) and in 1961 appeared a preface of twenty suicide note, a book of verse with personal and domestic poems. Several other collections followed like The Dead Lecturer (1964), Black Art (1966) and Black Magic (1969). His later collections include Its Nations Time (1970), Spirit Reach (1972), Hard Facs (1977) Am Irak (1979) and Thoughts for You (1984). In 1964 Baraka had four of his plays produced such as The Baptism, The Toilet, The Slaves and The Dutchman.

The Dutchman was first played at the Cherry Lane Theatre in Greenwich Village, New York, in March 1964 and won an Obie Award. The play may be described as a political allegory depicting black, white relations in the 1960's. The Dutchman is a play of entrapment in which a white woman Lula and a middle-class black man Clay express their murderous hatred on a subway. The underground location of the drama is mythical or subconscious as the title refers to the fate of a flying Dutchman doomed to sail forever until his final peace can be purchased by a lover willing to die with him.

The Dutchman was in part responsible for the growth of a genre called Black Literature known as Black Arts Movement. With the The Dutchman, Baraka opened the doors for the Black American writers to deal with a broad range of political, racial and social themes and it paved the way for the Black

Revolutionary Theatre. The play *The Dutchman* revolutionised the Black theatre in post war America and illustrates the persistence of racial tension in the United States in the 1960's and represents an emerging militant attitude on the part of American Blacks. "Dutchman" stands as an incisive critique of race relations through the sexually charged interaction of two characters Lula and Clay on a subway. The play presents the agonized and tensed life of a black man in a white dominated American society and it warns the blacks against the genocidal attitudes of the whites. There is Cultural-racial injustice lurking in the play and it stresses the conflict between two hostile visions of the blacks and the whites. The white culture is guilty of oppressing and exploiting the black minority.

*The Dutchman* opens with a well-dressed, intellectual, young African American man named Clay in his twenties absorbed in reading a magazine. He represents the African-American male at a cultural crossroad and he is a model of black middle class composure. He is an educated individual who cannot escape the stereotypes and power dynamics of his racist society. His neurosis is simply the neurosis endemic to being a black man in American culture.

Lula is a tall, slender, beautiful woman white woman with a long red hair and a small revealing dress and she is the white villainous of the play. She boards the subway, daintily eating an apple. After momentarily awaiting Clay's acknowledgment of her presence, she takes the seat next to him. Lula suggestively slices and eats an apple. She and Clay tease each other with bantering talk that becomes more and more personal. She reveals little about herself, but Lula is clearly in control of the conversation and the situation as she perceptively and provokingly challenges Clay's middle class self image.

Lula's comments surprise him with their eerily insightful knowledge of his private life. She tells Clay "You tried to make it with your sister when you were ten... But I succeeded a few weeks ago" She might be hinting to the incestuous relationship prominently seen among the blacks. She mocks at his attire and adds "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". She tells Clay "You're a murderer, Clay, and you know it". Her pronouncement of Clay's desire to murder the White is based on the assumption that all Black men are secretly murderers. She proves this by bringing out the potential murderer in Clay. Lula claims that she only knows so much about Clay because he is a "well-known type," that type being a socially ambitious black man.

Lula plays a tantalizing and provocative role, constantly fooling around with words of racism and with Clay himself:

"Come on Clay, let's do the thing...You middle-class black bastard. Forget your social-working mother for a few seconds and let's knock stomachs. Clay you liver-lipped white man. You would be Christian. You ain't no nigger, you're just a dirty white man...That's all you know...shaking that wildroot cream-oil on your knotty head, jackets buttoning up to your chin, so full of white man's words."

Lula's comments hints on the status which blacks had in America in the 1960s. When he refuses her invitation to dance. She responds with a string of vicious insults:

"You middle class black bastard. Forget your social-working mother for a few seconds and let's knock stomachs. Clay, you liver-lipped white man.You would-be Christian. You ain't no nigger, you're just a dirty white man."

To live as a Black was not easy for Clay and he had to sacrifice his identity and adopt the materialistic ideas of the Whites to sustain in a White dominated American social order. He ignores his black identity as he assimilates himself into white culture. He is robbed of his manhood by a perverted society. Leroi Jones says that " *The Dutchman* is about the difficulty of becoming a man in America". Clay is presented as an example of the victims that people revolutionary theatre. He can be very well considered as an anti hero rather than as a hero for he displays none of the heroic qualities.

Since Clay is insecure about his race, social status, and masculine prowess he lacks identity. Lula's constant nagging words and taunts make him aware of his lack of identity and his answers shift from machismo to defensiveness. Lula's attempt to force Clay to see in himself the negative stereotypes of the black male as either oversexed stud or cringing Uncle Tom goad him into an eloquently bitter tirade. He tells her that Black music and African American culture are actually repressions of a justified rage that has kept African American people sane in the face of centuries of oppression. Clay seems too desperate to prove this to himself as he is to convince Lula. He does not seem to know whether the rage or the repression has taken the greater toll on African American sanity. The scene escalates in dramatic force until Lula unexpectedly stabs Clay to death. It is Clay's hypothesis that racism can only be solved through a refusal to acknowledge it prompts Lula to stab him to death.

Clay's lack of identity can be understood metaphorically in Freudian terms as evidence of his "castration" by white society, represented by Lula's murder of Clay with a suspiciously phallic knife. She orders the other passengers who are her allies representing a racist society, to get rid of his body: "Open the door and throw his body out." Lula escapes punishment and she seeks out another prey. She makes an entry in her notebook. The victimization will go on as she will confront another black man who carries books and boards the train. The people in the subway do not protest against the murder of Clay. This is another metaphor for white people turning a blind eye to human suffering. Everyone gets off the subway, acting as if nothing has happened. Lula's treatment of Clay did not seem to be new to her; it appeared as though this behaviour was almost second nature to her.

The dramatist carefully drives home the reasons for Clay's death. Lula's oppressive racial power is as much the reason for Clay's death as is his own negation of his self. He is a victim not only of white racism but of his own lack of identity. Lula is a symbol of endemic racism, since her status as a white person gives her power over Clay and makes her the sexual aggressor.

An enigma of themes and racial conflicts are blatantly exemplified within the short duration of the play. Baraka attacks the issue of racial stereotype symbolically through the relationship of the play's only subjects, Lula and Clay. Baraka uses theatricality and dynamic characters as a metaphor to portray an honest representation of racist stereotypes in America through both physical and psychological acts of discrimination. Baraka uses character traits, symbolism and metaphor to exhibit the legacy of racial tension in America.

The play operates mostly on a symbolic level. Lula represents white America and the tendency of white Americans to stereotype Blacks. The apples that she munches throughout represent the promises that America holds out to African Americans and the wastefulness of white America as she throws the apples away half eaten. Clay represents Black America, or more accurately, the assimilation of this community into the white middle class society.

There are many layers of the allegorical relationships between Blacks and whites in the play and it resonates with the inequality and injustices of this society. Baraka, a young gifted bohemian black poet living in Greenwich Village in New York City during the early 60's was personally struggling with racism despite his once friendly relationships with many white friends and artists.

Baraka has said that Dutchman "is about how difficult it is to become a man in the United States". The ancient symbolism of apple and temptation, and the myth of the ghostly pirate ship, The Flying Dutchman, used in Richard Wagner's opera and other literary works, are carefully suggested in Baraka's play and amplify the dimensions of racial conflict.

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