

criticism

Imamu Amiri Baraka : Towards Black Spiritualism

by Neamat Imam

AERICAN CONSCIOUSNESS, from the May Flower Pact and Massachusetts Bay Colony in the early seventeenth century down to the last decade of the twentieth century, has received tremendous change in respect of religious identity, cultural integrity and political idealism. Starting with radical Puritanism and passing through years of complication and compromise, America now claims to have a religion of its own which is named "the civil religion." Culturally it has tried to discover some roots rebuking Columbus for his adventurous talent and discovery, to nullify the serpentine accusers' "silly" condemnation over its claims to be a civilization in its own right. At political level, it has materialized the dreams of the Great Predecessors who wanted to confirm a satisfactory territory for its "light-bearers" — no matter if it be through narrow expansionism — and has come to be the solitary superpower on earth in the post Cold War era. But how much of this Americanism has to do with the black consciousness and how much of it recognizes the blacks as equal race to enjoy equal privileges with the whites?

LeRoe Jones or Imamu Amiri Baraka appears on the scene as a dramatist of consciousness-in-transition and writes in blood the legacy of the humiliation of denial of the blacks on the part of the whites, reevaluating their fragmented past and the distorted present, for the concretisation of a news spirituality in the traditional Americanism. The Slave, one of his early plays, dramatizes his hatred for the whites from the viewpoint of a radical separatist against the professionalised form of entertainment that, according to Baraka, the American theatergoers usually expect on the stage. In this play, a Negro slave, Walker Vessels, is found to assault and eventually kill Easley, a white and the present husband of his previous wife Grace who is also a white, and leave his apartment amidst frequent explosions to join the black revolutionists. It is a critical moment of racial discrimination that they are passing both externally and internally, for at this very moment Walker is facing not only Grace and Easley, but in them his white counterparts, who, as an exercise of their blind ego, subjected the blacks to endless deception and crises throughout the ages. Even when comes the question of saving Grace's two daughters, of course by Walker himself from his previous marriage, who are on the first floor of the house, Walker cannot stop which shows that he is not ready to show even human weakness on the question of their emancipation

from the black hands of the whites. Walker Vessels of The Slave could very easily be identified with Baraka himself whose practical participation in the pilgrimage to creating a new consciousness among the blacks starts with his coming to the leadership of the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School (BART/S) in the mid-1960s. BART/S was an organization that believed in the values of the black heritage and tried to achieve for the blacks a balanced position through all-embracing movements, starting from the root level and then gradually conglomerating to a unified racial protest against all kinds of preconceived suppression. In this regard Baraka found a revolt inadequate in the form of fiction and composition of poetry, for which he took the advantage of organized recreation or staging plays as the visual transcriptions of his dreams which seemed to him to be a better lecturer and which, earnestly removing the gap between people and theory, between people and the politics of politics, would bring spontaneity and a sense of the self among the blacks. What he wrote in his essay 'The Need for a Cultural Base to Civil Rights and Black Movements' in 1968, that "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," could be stated for a better understanding of the issue. Consciousness regarding the past and commitment of the present might be the best help for the blacks towards maintaining an existence of honor and respect.

Unfortunately, the BART/S comes to meet premature death due to financial insufficiency which was to come from the Government. The funding was stopped on the issue of an allegation against Baraka which told that he was spreading hatred among the blacks for the whites. There were some other reasons behind the disintegration of this school, being one the conceptual indeterminacy and division in the leadership. But despite its transitoriness, it played undoubtedly an important role at the time of transition and had effectively proclaimed its presence through the programs that followed. Henry Lacey informs us that as a result of BART/S experiment, black theater groups were formed across the country which marched onward from West Coast, Philadelphia, Jersey City, New Orleans, Washington DC, and similar groups sprang up even on such college campuses as San Francisco State College, Fisk University, Lincoln University, Hunter College, Columbia Uni-



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versity, Oberlin College, etc.

The extinction of the BART/S brought its organizer new outlet. In 1967 Baraka met Ron Karenga, a cultural nationalist, whose working process impressed him much which provided potential for the establishment of the BCD, BCD or the Black Community Development had several members who were adherents of the Kawaida faith which, critics say, was but "a conclusion that seemed to be borne out by Baraka's own statements regarding its practical nature." The Kawaida followers borrowed orthodox Islamic and African concepts, of didacticism, and used to wear African garbs and take Islamic names. This is at this moment Everett LeRoe Jones became Ameer (later Amiri) Baraka, which means 'blessed preacher' to which he later added 'Imamu,' meaning 'spiritual leader'. Baraka himself defined Kawaida in his 'A Black Value System' in 1969 as that "which is customary or traditionally adhered to by black people." The Black Community Development and the followers of Kawaida wanted to organize the blacks to earn political supremacy over the whites so that the laws of the land were changed and new environment of right and respect was created, a

direct result of which is noticed in the election of Kenneth Gibson as Newark's black major in 1970.

Baraka is found to admonish the blacks against their "magnified" integration into the whites with "the fervor of a black fundamentalist preacher," which is better exposed in his 'Poem For Halfwhite College' that he dramatically presented before several hundred black college students. "How do you sound, your words, are they yours?" he wrote. "The ghost you see in the mirror, is it really you, can you swear you are not an imitation gray boy, can you look right next to you in the chair, and swear, that the sister you have your hand on is not really so full of Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton is coming out of her ears." Privileges of white life, insistence on the whites' ideas, and idealization of the white as beautiful and glorious allure some blacks to think of themselves eternally inferior to the whites and this is another reason behind the continuous discordance in black life, observes Baraka, which, in spite of huge protest and procession, weakens the black consciousness to stand as mightily as it really is. It is a self-destructive obsession with the blacks, of which Walker himself is a victim. His marriage to

white Grace is an evidence of it. Walker says that he is Othello, Grace is Desdemona, and Easley is Iago, and forms the racial triangle, as Shakespeare explained it four hundred years ago.

But is it actually 'spiritual', as Baraka suggests, to emancipate the blacks from the white oppression? America achieved its independence in 1776, which was but the independence of the whites, for the blacks were slaves then, and their slavery continued as predestined rule. They worked hard to bring advancement in every field of individual and national level, to create "the City on Hill," which was the ultimate dream of the Predecessors. The Transcendentalists who liberated America "intellectually" and worked as new frontier said almost nothing regarding the rights of the blacks. They were radical Americans who thought of America as a different nation for the first time. It was the Transcendentalists who gave the Americans the sense of Americanism, freeing the nation from the baffling memory of the days of foreign evasion and domination, but themselves dominating the blacks. Walt Whitman sang of himself, of America, and contained in him everything, from body to soul, love to sex, mundane to terrestrial, ghost to God, moment to eternity, sand to sky, everything, and not the blacks. A song of the American self remains absolutely incomplete unless it sings of its blacks who enriched the agrarian South with its strict traditional sense of aristocracy, and the industrialized North, married to technological development. Where from comes the rhythmic flow in Whitman's song of America? From the Blues of the booted blacks, who were forbidden to sing in public or in the presence of their masters and who let loose their thirst for music only in the church hymns. In this play Walker is found to comment on the blues tradition: "Old, old blues people moaning in their sleep, singing, man, oh, nigger, nigger, you still here, as hard as nails, and takin' no shit from nobody." Whitman's self is clean, uniform, it would not have been obscure or vague had it contained in it the black color of the blacks.

Even the Civil War in the beginning of the 1860s was a political illusion, which led Abraham Lincoln to power who took the issue of the blacks' rights and added individual article to American constitution. The Civil War brought the blacks constitutional emancipation, not the social and economic emancipation: there came no change in the whites in their treatment of the blacks. Of course the blacks were the main issue in the war, but it was not meant for their emancipation, rather a

question — who will use them, North or South — came to be the main focus of the conflict. The South opposed the black emancipation lest their feudalistic system fell apart. On the other hand, the North wanted to liberate the slaves so that they could employ hundreds and thousands of just-freed unemployed slaves in their rising industries in exchange of minimum or non-mentionable salary. Then came in chain realism, naturalism, regionalism, expressionism and in the 1950s came Blackism as an essential outcome of social evolution of which Baraka is a great activist. Quest for God for the blacks has now turned into a quest for identity and separation — in the sense that, it would eliminate every discrimination of the whites towards the blacks.

As a poet Walker is a failure. The reason is that "his art has been compromised by a certain dependency on the Western tradition," and that, it does not contain his dreams of revolutionary change. Baraka criticizes the traditional definition of art which is given by the whites and which, according to him, is but "luxurious musings in silence" and is more utopian than real. The distinctiveness of art, as the whites value it, lies in its separation from society and is simply an extension of the self-indulgent imagination which Baraka regards as "unhealthy aesthetic." A conscious black writer cannot exercise this distinctiveness in art and if he does so he would be considered to be the victim of racial self-hatred, or racial or cultural escapism. It would forbid the blacks to form a positive sense of the self. Baraka's didacticism runs further: black music, black language and black cultural values — these are not only the demands of the present, but the moral corruption of American society and its idealization of false dreams would also find a solution in them, which is why the blacks deserve recognition.

The Slave is not Baraka's best play. It does not answer every question regarding black emancipation, nor does it conceptualize Baraka as a playwright and political activist. It simply bids bye to night of somnambulism and welcomes a day of protest and promise. Walker Vessels rejects the self-denying role of a poet which has been assigned to him by America itself, and from the position of an "old field slave," as it is noted in the prologue of the play, comes to contain the self of a modern revolutionary. After the verbal, emotional, and physical confrontation, when Walker leaves the house, he is freed of all misfortunes and oppressions of the past, and is confirmed of his ethnic perception, like a surrogate for his creator.

poems



Inside The Rustle

by Nuzhat Amin Mannan

It is syrupy. Like stagnation.
And every time, daughter, you
lift the spoon —
Trails of gossamer like threads
will hang in the air —
Leaving something sweet and light
to thicken and become
shining shreds of sadness.

Tea leaves spattered against
the purity of the cup, will mother
A hoarse silence

Unmistakable, in the mornings
Specially before the rustle of the
beginnings of a long day.

It is all there, daughter —
the dream — shelled, split and marooned.

A Message

by Abu Taher Mojmuder

I'm different now:
On a good job —
Your condition fulfilled —
Yet failed courage unrevived:
An orphan in the realm of love
Unscrupulous cupid's hapless victim —

What's of your promise?

The seige and non-cooperation are over
But the searchlight pinned to a threatening rock,
Whither is the buoy of hope? —
Your promise...

I flew to Ajanta and Elora
And embroidered by love with new dreams
And won a First Prize for you

What's of your promise?

I went to Kathmandu
Saw the peak of Everest dim and disappearing
My hopes and confidence

You said you love victories —
I became a Napoleon:
You turned your face away
O Josephine Josephine Josephine
The petals of my heart fall off your shuttered window.

A Meeting With Poets

(For Kaiser Haq and Sudeep Sen — Poets)
by Arifa Ghani

It was dark — cross clouds crowded my sky:
The sun seemed unlikely to shine.
I searched my mind for a glimmer,
But realised relief was not to be mine.

It was dark — the night had dropped its curtain:
No stars glittered on its pitch canvas.
My mind and I groped in the blackness for a hint of light,
But freedom was not for us.

It was dark — the grave is such when filled in:
No sun, no stars illumine this room.
Such darkness blanketed my mind
And I felt the call of doom.

God is great! God is great! I shout
For suddenly the sun is out.
Two poets has He sent to me —
What better relief can there be?
Each read his poems with such an air
He filled the heart that before was bare:
Uplifted me, my very soul,
And slowly away depression stole.
Now, all who read, hear this from me,
Greater than poets there none can be.
Poetry soothes and poetry calms —
Stronger than the strongest balms.
Clouds, night, grave — all are fled
A certain lightness now fills my head.
Hail the Poet, the healer true
For he helps build the world anew.

Thunderbay Episode

Helal Kabir Chowdhury

On a summer evening
I arrived in the Bay.
She was not with me
But 'Gurus' blessing was
there on me.
Obsessed with Melancholia
surge for her.
Before I reached the Bay
All lovers song sung in chime.
Failed to do away with
obsession, reminiscence, nostalgia.
Endless love notes sent to Madison
Evoked no reply.
With cool breeze was
My heart warm.
Frenzied desperation to have
Celestial pleasure from her.
In my dream a
son born to her.
No consent from her
No yield to my yearning.
She was sunk in love
with her man
who loved not more
than I did.
The Bay did not
depress, reject me.
It was full of wonders,
Affection, love and care
Made me forget her
But not forgive.