Introduction

The emergence of Black nationalism as a socio-political and literary movement in the USA in the early 1960s is a highly significant event in the history of African-American people. Although it is not something new, it is, as Theodore Draper says in his essay, "The Fantasy of Black Nationalism," "similar to and yet different from its manifestations in the past; it is related to and yet distinct from all other nationalisms in the world today"(27). African-American nationalism in the 1960s is different from its earlier manifestations insofar as it recuperates the earlier movements and adds to its ideology a greater aesthetic dimension; it is similar to the earlier movements in its political zeal and racial self-consciousness and its artistic power to transform the condition of blackness into an allegory of self-expression.

The emergence of Black consciousness as a distinctive expression of the desire of the Black Americans to find certain self-fulfilling acts of identification can be traced to post-Reconstruction period after the Emancipation Proclamation in February 1865. The major tendency among the blacks in America was to emigrate to their ancestral homeland, Africa. This tendency persisted till the weakening in the mid-1920s of Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement. Since then Black Nationalism in the United States has continued to influence such movements as African Blood Brotherhood, the Nation of Islam, an All-Negro-State in the Black Belt theory, and finally, the concept of Black Power advocated by Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton.

Looked at historically, the Black nationalism of the 1960s, unlike its past expressions which had taken the color of political activism, assumed the form of African-American cultural nationalism and was enhanced by the Black Arts Movement in general and Black Theatre

more important role than that of the political activist, and the playwright was at the center of the movement. Secondly, this nationalism was a reaction against the integrationist tendencies of the Black middle class. Thirdly, my study has tried to demonstrate that drama as a performative mode of literature has conveyed more eloquently than any other form the prevailing moods and ideologies of contemporary African Americans as they self-consciously search for a distinctive identity in the context of their American experience.

This identity can be found in family structures, in religion they practice and in their everyday relationships with the members of their community and with others outside their community. This desire for familial, communitarian and other institutional relationships can be explained in the context of the vestigial persistence of racism in the American unconscious. Although nationalism has found expression in all the literary forms, it is in drama that it has found its strongest articulation. The Black Arts Movement that emerged with the founding of the Black Arts theatre and School by Amiri Baraka (then known as LeRoi Jones) in Harlem in 1964 marks the beginning of the New Black Theatre Movement. Baraka's plays stressed the significance of African cultural roots in the life of African-American people. Baraka was joined by playwrights like Ed Bullins, Loften Mitchell, Ron Milner, Charles Fuller and many others, who strove to establish black solidarity through their rejection of the integrationist ideology of some of the Blacks. The playwrights of the Black Arts Movement strove to bring about a social change through drama. They tried to correct the defects of the Harlem Renaissance and "Back to Africa" movement by emphasizing the need for combining art with politics. Almost all the playwrights associated with the Black Arts Movement felt this need to forge solidarity through art. To them politics which suggests activism was not necessarily antithetical to art. The writers of the Harlem Renaissance lacked in political zeal; the politicians of the "Back to Africa"

movement were deficient in artistic power. The dramatists of the 1960s combined the power of politics with artistic expression and redressed the deficiencies of the earlier movements.

The playwrights selected in this study are Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, Ntozake Shange, and August Wilson. Although their modes and methods of articulation are different, they share the same ideology of cultural nationalism. The critics, both black and white, who have studied these playwrights have tried to address some of the important issues concerning the rise of Black consciousness but no sustained attempt has been made by any of these critics to examine the spirit of Black cultural nationalism in its historical context. Genevieve Fabre's *Drumbeats, Masks and Metaphor: Contemporary Afro-American Theatre* (1983) deals with the portrayal of Black theatre in the USA emphasizing its connection with the African roots. Mance Williams does try to give some idea of Black theatre in its historical perspective in *Black Theatre in the 1960s and 1970s: A Historical-Critical Analysis of the Movement* (1985) but leaves out the direction it took after the 1970s. Kimberly Benston's *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask* (1976), and *Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones): A collection of Critical Essays* (1978) deal with Baraka's contribution only. Worner Sollors' *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for A "Populist Modernism"* (1978) contains a chapter on Baraka as a cultural nationalist but it does not place him in a historical context. Similarly, William J. Harris's *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: the Jazz Aesthetic* (1985) and, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* (1991) also deal with the contribution of an individual writer. Neal Lester's *Ntozake Shange: A Critical Study of the Plays* (1995) deals with Shange's plays but does not examine Shange as an heir to Black nationalism of the 1960s and place her in the tradition of African-American drama and theatre; and, the most recently published book-length studies on Wilson, *August Wilson* by Marilyn Elkins (1994), and *August Wilson and the African-American Odyssey* by Kim Pereira (1995) also do not place him in a

historical perspective. In my dissertation I have taken into account all these gaps and tried to examine some representative plays in the light of the persistent cultural nationalism as a unifying force in African-American consciousness today.

Some Black theorists have been examining this cultural nationalism by placing the works of the Black writers in a contemporary theoretical perspective. With the rise of post structuralism, feminism, Lacanian psychoanalysis and other modes of analytical tools for interpretation a new way of looking at racially and ethnically conscious texts is already in order. Black theorists have been using some of the new insights and methodologies and trying to study Black texts in a fresh way.

Various theories have come up by African-American scholars as expression of a need for revaluation of Black literature in terms of its inherent cultural and racial paradigms. These Black theorists feel that it is not proper to examine Black texts in light of Western theories developed by whites. Such attempts at developing distinctive Black theories were made in the past, but they did not consolidate into a systematic formulation; they were merely scattered attempts made individually by Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal and others without any move towards a collective consensus. Houston A. Baker, Jr., Willie Susan, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. have made the most significant efforts in this direction. Baker's theory of the "Black vernacular," Susan's theory of the "specifying" and Gates's theory of the "Signifying Monkey" are such attempts at defining African-American critical theory.

In "Criticism in the Jungle," an introductory essay in his book *Black Literature and Literary Theory* (1984), Gates raises the following questions, which had never been asked before:

> What is the status of the black literary work of art? How do canonical texts in the black traditions relate to canonical texts of the Western traditions? How are we to read black

> texts? Can the methods of explication developed in Western criticism be 'translated' into the black idiom? How 'text-specific' is literary theory, and how 'universal' are rhetorical strategies? If every black canonical text is... 'Two-toned' or 'double-voiced', how do we explicate the signifyin (g) black difference that makes black literature 'black'? (3)

By raising such questions Gates is emphasizing the need to invent a valid 'black' critical theory which every competent black writer must take up. He asserts that the "challenge of black literary criticism is to derive principles of literary criticism from the black tradition itself, as defined in the idiom of critical theory but also in the idiom which constitutes the 'the language of blackness', the signifyin (g) difference which makes the black tradition our very own" ("Jungle" 8).

While Gates emphasizes the need for a valid 'black' critical theory, he does not ignore the contribution of the Western white critical traditions in providing a basis for a reformulation of black theory. This, he says, is another essential part of the "challenge of our endeavor... to bring together, in a new fused form, the concepts of critical theory and the idiom of the Afro-American and African literary tradition. To undertake this complex process, we use Western critical theories to read black texts" ("Jungle" 9-10). A critic of black texts, in short, has the need to take recourse to appropriate ideas and methods from Western critical theories as a mode of cultural appropriation. Here one has to understand that the Blacks and Whites do not continue their differences as points of collision but look upon each other in terms of complementarity. That is why, Black theorists are not exclusivist in their critical formulations but partake of whatever is useable from the Western tradition. However, they do not "merely 'repeat' or 'apply' a mode of reading that is 'formalist', 'Marxist', 'structuralist' or 'post-structuralist' borrowed *whole* (Gates's italics) from the Western tradition"("Jungle" 3). But

whenever they repeat, their repetition suggests a difference—"a signifying black difference"(3). Gates theorizes the nature of this signifying difference of a black literary text in his seminal essay "The Blackness of Blackness: a [sic] Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey" which is included in *Black Literature and Literary Theory* (1984).

In the first part of this essay he elaborates the various definitions of the Signifying Monkey as a version of the divine Esu of the Yoruba mythology. In the second part of the essay he offers practical criticism of some black texts which conform to the technique of 'signifying' as a mode of figuration. He elaborates on Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* as an excellent example of pastiche, one of the most important characteristics of the technique of signifying. He has drawn the figure of the Signifying Monkey from hundreds of the tales of the trickster figure, which had their origin in slavery, recorded since the nineteenth century. The roots of the Signifying Monkey, as he implies, lay deep in black culture:

> My theory of interpretation, arrived at from within the black cultural matrix, is a theory of formal revision; it is tropological; it is often characterized by pastiche; and, most crucially, it turns on repetition of formal structures and their difference. ("Signifying" 285-6)

According to Brad Bucknell, Gates takes "signifying" for "an attempt to find a distinctively black method of reconciling history and form, textuality and experience, at least in part through a reappropriation of contemporary critical theory"(67). Bucknell says further that the central figure in the twentieth century who marks the most profound change in the conception of blackness is Richard Wright, who, as C. T. Davis claimed "made blackness a metaphysical state, a condition of alienation so profound that old values no longer applied" (Quoted in Bucknell 69). Bucknell implies that Gates suggests that a critic of Black texts must take into account both the historical matrix in which the texts are placed and the locations from

which the critic reads the texts. Gates emphasizes the black tradition of figuration, "the ability of saying one thing to mean something quite other" ("Jungle" 6).

In the context of Gates's theory of "signifying," a Black text can be examined from multiple perspectives. For example, Charles Peavy has studied some of the plays by African-American playwrights in the early decades of the twentieth century in terms of their primitivism and polemics. Primitivism was obviously meant for eluding the white audiences from the polemic tone of the plays. While primitivism, which entertained the white section in audience by its exotic appeal, was meant for concealing from the white audience the polemic tone of the plays, it also addressed the African-American audience by awakening their cultural identity and need to preserve their cultural values, thus making them face the challenge from the white world. African-American playwrights needed the white support and therefore did not want to offend their sensibilities by treating exclusive Black themes and concerns. But with the emergence of strong racial consciousness among the Blacks during the period of the Harlem Renaissance, such romantic primitivism gave way to pure polemics as the distinctive Black expression. The white liberal was prone to be lulled into emotional sweep of the exoticism of the plays. When this approach had served its purpose by the end of the Harlem Renaissance, the African-American playwright gradually gave up the primitivistic element and continued the role of a polemicist dividing his message both for the white audience as well as for the black. It is through the insights provided by Gates's theory of "the Signifying Monkey" that we can understand the plays by African-American playwrights by decoding the language which has been used as a cultural code since the early days of slavery.

Since the early seventeenth century, blacks in America have developed a common code of communication—which is beyond the white man's comprehension—which they have used for communication among themselves especially in an emergency or to convey a special

message in the same way as they used drums to communicate during the plantation years. The black authors drew inspiration from their predecessors and repeated the themes dealt with by them either from a different perspective or in a form in tune with the time in which they lived and with a special purpose of educating the community. From this coded communication which has been actually a part of a black man's training required for his survival in the white world what is called "Black English" has developed. Out of this communicative system, efforts have been made recently to develop theories, which could apply to black texts. The black history that Gates wants to develop through intertextuality seems to be the appropriate version of black history in America. "Formal signifying," says Brad Bucknell, "is Gates's metaphor for literary history" (75).

During the period between the two World Wars, the playwright made much of this dual mode of communication by promoting the most popular form of entertainment—the musical. According to William Branch, three graduates of the famed Harlem Renaissance of the twenties—when the Negro was "in vogue"—were involved in prominent musicals of the forties ("I" xviii). Arna Bontemps and Countee Cullen supplied the book for the Broadway musical, *St. Louis Woman*, based upon Bontemps' novel, *God Sends Sunday*, and Langston Hughes wrote the lyrics for the Kurt Weill's opera *Street Scene*. While the musical made the productions of Negro material financially viable, the efforts at writing and producing serious plays also continued the trend of polemically written plays, thereby raising the consciousness of the community against the inhuman treatment its members were subjected to. Through the medium of serious plays African-American playwrights began destroying the traditional stereotypical images created by white playwrights. For example, the dramatization of Richard Wright's best-selling novel about an interracial murder in Chicago was staged on Broadway setting as an image of the domestic slave contrary to the traditional image of the meek Uncle

Tom. Theodore Ward's Federal Theater play of thwarted Black hopes during Reconstruction, *Our Lan'* (1946) was brought to Broadway briefly. African-American playwrights continued to subvert their derogatory images into those images which the black people in the audiences took as positive portrayals, while the white people would continue to assume them as entertaining ones. This is what Gates's theory tries to explain. Bullins's characters are "bad niggahs" for the white audience but Bullins is "the baddest soul brother" for his community. The trickster figure from the black mythology—the Signifying Monkey, a version of the divine Eshu in the African Yoruba language—is the role model for the African-American playwright to learn from the strategies of survival in a world dominated by whites. There are characters resembling the mythological trickster or there is at least one quality of that trickster in a character in almost every black text. Paul Carter Harrison draws a very interesting connection between the characters, Levee (*Ma Rainey*), Troy Maxson (*Fences*), Herald Loomis (*Joe Turner*), in August Wilson's plays and the Signifying Monkey. In his "Afterword" to *August Wilson: Three Plays,* Harrison writes:

> He is the mythic hero as underdog, the trickster legacy of Yoruba mythology, Eshu—reinvented throughout the diaspora as Exu in Brazil, Elegua in Cuba, Papa Legba in Haiti, and the Signifyin' Monkey in urban black America—who mediates the obstacles that threaten survival and harmony with wit, cunning, guile and a godly sense of self-empowerment which accords him extravagant transgressions. Alogical and nontraditional—at least more adept at improvisation—he is unimpressed with social constraints established for mortals of average size. (Harrison 301-2)

Similarly, it should be possible to draw a connection between the characters in any literary work by a black writer and the mythological trickster figure who is himself, as Henry Louis Gates claims, the technique of black figuration and appears sometimes as a personification. In

the plays of Amiri Baraka, or Bullins, too, it should be easy to locate characters with this aspect of the trickster that enables them to mediate "the obstacles that threaten survival and harmony with wit, cunning, guile and a godly sense of self-empowerment which accords him extravagant transgressions" (Harrison 301). Obviously, the language is figuratively used to mean something different for the African-American community in the audience from what the white spectators understand. When a character abuses another black the white people will take it literally, while for the black—both in the audience and those on stage—it will be a compliment or a sly warning.

Contemporary African-American nationalism is a culturally vibrant expression of an earlier consciousness developed as a way of circulating the special characteristic of the Black experience in a white-dominated America. But, whereas the earlier expression was confrontationist, the contemporary expression is collaborative and sympathetic. By employing various strategies of communication taken from both white and Black sources, Black writers and critics have tried to examine the nature of their cultural condition in terms of complementarity. This does not mean that their spirit of nationalism is subsumed under the general spirit of 'Americanness.' The sense of being Black and being American at the same time defines the nature of their nationalism as a product of their global status. The playwrights that I am going to study in detail in my subsequent chapters deal with this apparent paradox. They are Black and express their Blackness self-consciously, but they are not Blacks living in separate spheres. Each of the playwrights I shall be studying deals with this problematic in a specific way as part of his/her commitment to Black nationalism.

Contemporary African-American nationalism is a resurgence of the earlier expression of the concept of black nationalism. The African-American writer, especially the playwright, has assumed a more important role in the emergence of the concept in the form of a socio-

political and literary movement which expresses the concern of the African-American people for its solidarity to achieve Black Power. It also expresses very strongly the natural urge of the African Americans to establish the lost connections—a solution to the "cultural displacement" that took place as a result of the uprooting of the community from their ancestral homeland initially and then from the South that began at the turn of the century after the failure of Reconstruction.

Black Nationalism of the 1960s could be taken as a recuperation of all the attempts made by African-American community to find a solution to the Negro problem in the USA. It stands for a multiplicity of interpretations: a metaphor of revolution; an urge for racial solidarity; a hope for a black nation; a symbol for Black Power; a possibility for a splendid blending of the people having similar cultural roots in an alien nation. The playwrights represented here voice the repressed desires and the painful past of the community in their own peculiar ways. Baraka seeks to give vent to the repressed anger of his people by shocking and accusing their oppressors; Bullins shifted the focus of the Movement inward on the ills and alienated faction of the community, while satirizing the white community at the same time; Shange concentrates on the problems of women and strives to raise the consciousness of the 'doubly-marginalized' African-American women; and, Wilson admonishes the black community for ignoring the past.

One thing that certainly emerges as a contention of this study is that the emergence of Black Nationalism in the 1960s made the African Americans aware of the importance of going back to their African roots through their experience as slaves in America. In a vast country like America where it was difficult for the African Americans to reunite with their lost family members, they tried to seek communal bonds and self-authentication—a natural urge for solidarity that had emerged at intervals as nationalistic movements. For example, the

restlessness in Wilson's characters is a characteristic feature of African Americans who are seeking "spiritual unification with the mythological aspects of their greater cultural identity as Africans" (Pereira 3). "Since reunion with lost family members was not always possible in a country so vast," Pereira writes further, "Wilson elevates this theme [that of reunion] to a new, mystical dimension by suggesting that black migration is ultimately a quest for self-authentication and empowerment" (3).

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