Chapter I

Black Nationalism and African-American Drama

The term "nationalism," which is employed to designate the emergence of modern states in Europe in the early nineteenth century has provided the basis for examining the nature of various movements or events throughout the world representing the aspiration of people for self-determination and identity. "Black or pan-African nationalism" and "African-American nationalism" have to be understood in the context of such aspirations. It is necessary here to clarify the distinctions between these two types of nationalism. "Black American" or "African-American nationalism" is associated with all the people of African origin—people of Africa and the diaspora—and is a comprehensive term which includes the African-American variety. "Black American" or "African-American nationalism" is a form of "Black or Pan-Africanism" but has a different cultural context as it is connected with the struggle of the American Blacks since the time of slavery for some form of independence within the American national boundary. The literature produced by the Blacks testifies eloquently to such struggles and aspirations. It is a part of American literature; yet it has a distinctive character of its own as it has grown out of the specific nature of the struggle of the Blacks to come to terms with their reality in an alien land and of a need to transcend that alienness.

1. Nationalism and African-American Nationalism

It is necessary at the outset to understand what the term "nationalism" means and to place its various implications in the context of our definition of the term "Black Nationalism" in the United States. Ernest Renan says in his essay "What is a Nation?" that "The idea [of various nations and groups of people] though seemingly clear, lends itself to the most dangerous misunderstandings" and adds that "Nowadays, a far graver mistake is made: race is confused

with nation and a sovereignty analogous to that of really existing people is attributed to ethnographic or rather linguistic groups"(8). After a detailed discussion Renan contends that "[a] nation is... a large scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future.... A large aggregate of men, healthy in mind and warm of heart, creates the kind of moral conscience, which we call a nation"(19-20). Here Renan has given a broad definition of nationalism in which specific categories of religious, linguistic and ethnographic difference tend to conflate with each other. Homi K. Bhabha too points out the ambivalence of this concept when he says that there is "a particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write it and the lives of those who live it"("I" 1). He further clarifies that the "image of a nation" has emerged from "narration" of "traditions of political thought and literary language" as a "powerful historical idea in the west"(1). Benedict Anderson too writes about such ambivalence in *Imagined Communities:*

> What I am proposing is that Nationalism has to be understood, by aligning it not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which—as well as against which—it came into being. (12)

The term "nationalism" is, thus, very complex in its connotations and has to be understood in relation to the cultural systems of a nation which include its history, its mythologies, heroes, wars, conquests, and even failures and its subsequent ideologies.

Boyd Shafer says in, *Nationalism: Interpreters and Interpretations,* "Nationalism is what the nationalists have made it; it is not a neat, fixed concept but a varying combination of beliefs and conditions. It may be in part founded on myth but myths like errors have a way of perpetuating themselves and of becoming not true but real"(6). Shafer gives a list of ten generalized beliefs and conditions necessary to get to the nature of the concept of

"nationalism." The list includes: a certain defined unit of territory; some common cultural characteristics; a common independent or sovereign government; a belief in common history and in a common origin; a love or esteem for a fellow national; a devotion to the entity called nation; a common pride; a disregard for or hostility to other like groups; and, a hope that the nation will have a great and glorious future. These broad characteristics, however, do not strictly apply to all brands of nationalism determined by specific indigenous factors. Shafer concludes that the present denotation of "Nationalism" may be taken as a "sentiment unifying a group of people who have a real or imagined common historical experience and a common inspiration to live together as a separate group in the future" (10). He finally gives the definition its historical origin and progressive appropriation through various cultures:

> In its most modern form it requires, as Rousseau advocated as early as the eighteenth century, almost absolute devotion to and conformity with the will of the nation-state as this is expressed by the ruler or rulers... and it demands the supremacy... of the nation to which the nationalist belongs. (10)

He further elaborates on this aspect in this way: "Nationalism is a product of history, of nurture not nature. Nations were not born full-grown, nor are men born with love of nation inherent in them.... Nations today are the chief groups in which people divide—politically, economically, and socially"(1). Shafer's definition of the concept of nationalism forms the basis of my argument that Black nationalism in the USA is not just a political movement but is a formation of different ideologies shaping the Black consciousness over the years since the time of slavery.

African-American nationalism is a historical product of Pan-African nationalism transformed through a diasporic process of circulation. What is different about the nature of African-American nationalism is that from its originary impulse it is shaped by certain specific

forces generated by the physical and political conditions prevailing in the U. S. Therefore the growth of this nationalism is intricately bound with the historical process that shaped America as a nation. Contemporary African-American nationalism as one of the most powerful expressions of Black solidarity or pan-Africanism strongly advocates the creation of Black America within the confines of the United States through its peculiar narrative discourses developed individually and collectively by African-American writers. The African-American writers played a significant role in this respect. Leslie Sanders makes the following remarks about this aspect while evaluating the role played by Ed Bullins in this process:

> In a country so extensive and so rapidly changing, literature has often provided the only mode of apprehending places, people, history. The Negro has been part of... literary creations but, before Bullins, had been seen from a white perspective, as a figure in someone else's landscape. Bullins' plays reveal Black America and its mid-century perspective on the country as a whole. (185)

African-American nationalism has always aimed at binding the African-American community into a single group in the United States. African Americans have formed a culture within the United States through their subliminal identity with the people of Africa and have tried their best to evade the temptation of assimilation into the mainstream culture. Sanders says, "A national culture exists when the artists of a nation have created a world of the imagination, have succeeded in giving the people of the nation an extended artistic reference point, a mirror as well as a picture of their possibilities, creative means for extending their personal, social, and political sense of themselves"(60). In the beginning, music of the Blacks had this function of establishing a cultural identity. Later on, writers and other artists began to perform this task. Since music came mostly from Africa through slavery and was deeply associated with the sorrows and agonies of the slaves, Black nationalism was inspired by the African culture of the

past. In the present century it gradually took the shape of a re-definition of a cultural synthesis formed by the peculiar mixture of African and American inheritances. The earlier idea of "emigrationism" gave way to that of "integration." The main thrust of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s was a re-definition of their American identity through their racial "solidarity." Thus their distinctiveness from and similarities with others was emphasized. For example, for Ed Bullins, a central figure in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, the ultimate meaning of black nationalism was, as Leslie Sanders suggests, "the developing sense of community among Afro-Americans that transcends the physical proximity"(184). This means that all the Blacks scattered throughout the USA are tied to each other through an invisible bond of filiation. Sanders further elaborates on this with reference to Ed Bullins:

> ... Bullins' characters... seem rooted nowhere. This rootlessness suggests a black attitude, arising from historical experience, that in spite of long tenancy, the land is never really theirs. At the same time, in Bullins' works the black world is simply wherever there are black people, for their characteristic ways of speaking, their music, and their perspectives on the world transform the space they inhabit. (184)

While the general notion of "nationalism" is dependent on the closedness of geographical space of a nation, Black nationalism goes beyond the physical frontiers of a nation and takes on an emotional character. In Bullins' plays the focus on "persons and relationship rather than on place... [which makes the] as yet fragile but developing sense of community among Afro-Americans that transcends physical proximity and that is ultimately the meaning of black nationalism"(Sanders 184). In this respect Philip Harper also observes that Baraka includes in his poem "SOS" all members of the African diaspora as he explicitly and repeatedly gives a call to "*all* black people" (his emphasis) and thereby invokes "a political Pan-Africanism posited as characteristic of the Black Arts project" (Harper 236). Harper says

further that "Baraka's 'SOS' can be identified as emblematic of the poetic project of many young black writers of the late 1960s... radical black intellectual activism of the late 1960s was characterized by the drive for a nationalistic unity among people of African descent" (235).

The concept of black nationalism is not a recent idea. Historically speaking, it emerged along with the emergence of European nationalism in the late eighteenth century and evolved through various changes into its present-day expression after taking different revisionary forms. According to Harry Reed, "Black nationalism's origins probably date to the 1780s with the founding of the Free African Society of Philadelphia... [with] auxiliaries in several other northern cities... to serve a multitude of functions for the growing northern free black community"(50). The organization's activities, according to Reed, were to centralize discussions of black religious freedom; to organize black self-help effort; and, to provide the first organized political defense of the community. These efforts of the Free African Society of Philadelphia spawned its auxiliaries in several northern cities, only sowed the seeds of modern black nationalism but could not succeed fully in creating a sense of homogeneous unity among the Blacks due to the lack of a developed ideology for a separate political entity (Reed 50). In his book, *The Ideological Roots of Black Nationalism,* Sterling Stucky writes, "While these activities did shape the black political awakening, they did not constitute modern Black Nationalism" (2-3). Harry Reed makes the following comments on how this nascent nationalism finally developed into a full-fledged movement:

> Modern black nationalism is a concept incorporating attitudes and actions, which seek to control, direct, and shape political destiny. The hoped-for results of Black Nationalism have focused on two ideas. One, to build a political entity, a modern Black Nation state. Or, to achieve the acceptance that the group (Black Americans) constitutes a nation. (50)

For African Americans the evolution of nationalistic feelings from their earliest expression by emigrationist tendencies was confused with the idea of establishing a separate nation within the United States. Therefore these confusions prevented Black Nationalism from taking the shape of a distinctive political ideology. "Traditionally," says Draper, "black nationalism in the United States has taken two predominant forms.... The first was "migrationism" or "emigrationism" and it is still with us today—if only in fantasy... "(27). The other major form may be called 'internal statism.' The latter differs from the former in that "it seeks to establish an independent Negro state within the confines of what is now the United States"(Draper 31). Of these two earlier forms of black nationalism in the United States, the first was advocated by Thomas Jefferson even before the American Revolution. The words "all men are created equal" were his but, paradoxically, he believed that "blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments of both body and mind" (Quoted in Draper 27). On another occasion he said that the two races—black and white—couldn't live in the same government. Therefore he proposed a plan to the Virginia Assembly for freeing all slaves after they had reached maturity, but also proposed that the Negroes once freed must leave the country and settle elsewhere. From the early decades to the mid-nineteenth century, there were conscious efforts to promote emigration from the Southern states of the USA. Paul Cuffe, the first Negro leader associated with emigration to or colonization of Africa and one of the founders of the American Colonization Society (ACS) realized that the solution to the race problem lay in the wholesale Negro emigration to Africa. Although there were opposition and attacks to the efforts of the ACS by several Negro leaders like James Forten, Richard Allen and Martin R. Delany, among others, majority of the African Americans favored emigration from the USA. According to Bracey and others,

> The purest expression of nationalist ideology during the antebellum generation can be seen in the widespread support for emigration or colonization that developed in the late 1840s and 1850s. Unlike the Garvey movement of the 1920s, this emigration sentiment was a distinctly elite movement led by some of the most distinguished and successful members of the race. (Bracey *et al* 77)

These leaders, who had earlier been in the forefront of the fight for equal rights within the USA, turned to the idea of glorious opportunities awaiting black people in Africa or Latin America. Half a century later, Abraham Lincoln faced the same dilemma whether the slaves should be allowed to stay in America as American citizens after the emancipation or be free to go to Africa. In 1854, he admitted that his "first impulse would be to free all the slaves and send them to Liberia, to their own native land" (Quoted in Draper 28). In 1862, however, when he signed the Emancipation Proclamation, he gave the Blacks more hope for their future in America. Since then large groups of blacks from the South preferred to turn to the Northern states for better opportunities and to escape from poverty, pain and lynching. Consequently, the African-American people migrated from the South into three main directions—the North, the Midwest of the U. S. and the Western part of Africa. During the late 1870s, the growing racism that accompanied the close of the period of Reconstruction combined with economic depression made the working class Negroes work out the possibilities of migrating to the American Midwest, or Africa. "Later in the century," observes the editors of *Black Nationalism in America*, "both the attempt, on the one hand, to create an all-black state in Oklahoma and all-Negro towns like Mound Bayou, Mississippi, and the brilliant rhetoric of Bishop Henry M. Turner on the other, were to offer more dramatic evidence of nationalist feelings.... The desire for a 'territory of our own,'... whether within the United States or Africa, is an old and recurring theme... " (Bracey *et al* 156). The result of these

efforts was the creation of 25 black towns like Boley and Langston which are examples of what Negroes could accomplish through mobilization on the basis of race pride and solidarity. Thus the concept of Black solidarity for power is not a recent development but has emerged as early as the first half of the nineteenth century. But with the gradual change of perspective and understanding of the political process in the U. S. the Blacks have finally come to redefine their status in terms of their growing consciousness of their racial pride and uniqueness. That is why, they have rejected such derogatory labels as Negro or Black in favor of a generic term, African American, suggestive of their cultural and ethnic affiliation. This terminological change has ostensibly been a consequence of both the political activism as well as of literary movements of the Blacks. The increased racial consciousness is distinctly marked first at the turn of the nineteenth century and then continued to dominate in their literary and cultural expressions through the twentieth century.

While protest against racial inequality characterized black nationalism in the nineteenth century, "defiance" was the mood of the "New Negro" of the twentieth. The racial consciousness was further enhanced during the Harlem Renaissance, the century's first most creatively productive period. The 'Negro' became the 'black American' and became more conscious about his stereotypical images created by the white world. Black writers during the Harlem Renaissance attempted to counter these images by portraying Black characters which developed out of their tragic circumstances of their complex fate of being Americans and Blacks at the same time. From this kind of portrayal characters like Bigger Thomas were born later which were the antithesis of Uncle Toms and Christian Slaves. This increasing awareness of the American blacks of their peculiar condition and of their responsibility to forge the image of the "New Negro" through a defiant posture was also strengthened by their contact with the world outside the United States. During the First World War the African American soldiers

came into contact with the soldiers from other countries and through such contacts they came to know the freedom struggles taking place in many European countries, especially in the French colonies.

Later on, the Black writers came to know the revolutionary writers and theorists like Frantz Fanon. The liberation struggles on the African continent and the anti-imperialistic mood all over the world gave them tremendous encouragement to pursue their struggle for self-determination. By identifying with the freedom struggles of the people all over the world, they began to be conscious of their own oppressive state and turned to artistic expression for articulating their condition. Their turn to Africa can be explained in terms of such a need for collective identity. This need found strong expression in political movements like "emigrationism" and "internal statism" and gradually assumed the form of racial brotherhood of artists and writers. Although emigrationism and internal statism were never completely separate from one another, they used different means for defining their exclusive status as Blacks. The history of African Americans has shown that emigration to Africa, their homeland was a desired option as a way out of an oppressive state. This option was also suggestive of an emergent nationalism and communitarian identity. As Peter Bailey says, "They know that, despite everything, there is much strength in the black community.... "(19).

Draper's observation that other manifestations of black nationalism were products of regional concerns and that the nationalism which grew in the 1960s was a product of a national consensus among all Blacks in the U. S. clearly indicates the way the process of transformation has taken place in the historical process of the Black creative articulation. In their book, *Black Nationalism in America*, Bracey and others note that the emigrationist tendencies during Reconstruction anticipated the future nationalist movements. In his speeches and writings

Henry M. Turner, a leading Negro politician during Reconstruction and an advocate of emigration by the middle 1870s,

> foreshadowed the views of the more celebrated twentieth-century nationalist movements like the Garvey movement and the Black Muslims, in his damning of the American white society, in his advocacy of the necessity of a separate nation, and in his cultural nationalism including the belief that God is black. (Bracey *et al* 157)

It is clear from the history of African Americans that at the turn of the nineteenth century, while the migration of the African Americans to the Western part of Africa still continued to a certain extent, more and more blacks in the United States turned to the idea of a separate nation within the country. These two opposite tendencies provided a transition for a greater cultural breakthrough for the Blacks, which came into being in the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance gave some fillip to the idea of "Back to Africa" and emphasized at the same time a cultural rejuvenation within the United States. As Theodore Draper correctly observes,

> ... black nationalism in America is still seeking the right answers, and it is not yet clear that it has been asking the right questions... American history and conditions do not permit a black relationship to a national territory.... The result is that black nationalism has been vainly looking for a surrogate sovereignty, a substitute for a nation... [a fantasy which is unfulfillable] because the shadow of sovereignty can never take the place of the substance... [T] his fantasy-nationalism... wants sovereignty, but a subsidized sovereignty. It seeks to develop the rudiments of a new black nation, but merely succeeds in producing a new form of a black ghetto. It cannot break the umbilical cord with the white world, and it cannot live harmoniously within that world. (50-51)

2. Marcus Garvey: "Back to Africa" Movement

Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement coincided with cultural resurgence of the Blacks during the Harlem Renaissance. It is a very important movement spearheaded by the Universal Negro Improvement Association founded in 1914 by Marcus Garvey. Garvey contended that whites would always be racists and insisted that the black man must develop "a distinct racial type of civilization of his own and... work out his salvation in his motherland" (Quoted in Bracey, *et al* 158). On a more practical level, he urged Negroes to support Negro business through U. N. I. A., which organized a chain of stores of various kinds. He denounced the light-skinned middle and upper-middle class Negroes active in the NAACP for being ashamed of their black ancestry and for their desire to assimilate themselves with the white race. For the first time in the history of African Americans, this movement made them conscious of power in race solidarity. But the Blacks, in an increasing number, continued to support the idea of inter-statism and were not in favor of emigration to another country and the movement eventually failed. Another reason for the failure of Garvey's movement was its insistence on the racial purity of the Black race, a notion which did not carry much conviction among liberal Blacks. The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s is remarkable for creating conditions for the emergence of what Alaine Locke called the "New Negro," who demanded recognition as "the heir and representative of a separate dynamic culture with a distinctive history and canon of values"(Bracey *et al* 50). Although Garvey's movement failed, it inspired in the Blacks a sense of collective power and solidarity and made them aware of their rich cultural roots. The spirit of Renaissance came out of this awareness. Thus, for the first time in the African-American history there was a correspondence between the two movements—one political, and the other literary—taking place simultaneously in the 1920s, but independent of one another. The Garvey movement, as Kimberly Benston remarks, "failed to achieve a coherent aesthetic based

on clear harmonization of political theory and artistic inclination" (51). The Black Arts Movement later made up this deficiency during the 1960s. Benston adds that since the Harlem Renaissance "every major black writer has had to address the problem of the relation between aesthetic and political theories"(50). Gradually as the Blacks became increasingly conscious of their artistic, political and cultural heritage, the political aspect of their movement became subsumed under the aesthetic. The following comments by Benston throw light on this:

> It is in reaction to the belief that the job of ethnic renewal lies in autonomous artistic fulfillment rather than racial separatism or political revolution... that the young black intellectuals and artists of the 1960s made a rejuvenated attempt to establish a black aesthetic that would account for matters of politics as well as of art. The aesthetic discussions of the Black Arts Movement, led principally by Imamu Baraka:.. unified social and artistic ideology into one coherent black aesthetic theory. (53-54)

Thus the nationalistic movements in the USA have been evolutionary in nature and each subsequent movement revised the earlier expressions of black nationalism. Emigrationism was a movement toward a community affiliation outside the USA; internal statism was focused on a separate Black state within the country, particularly in the Black belt of the South. But both are similar in the sense that they made a case for strong racial solidarity through ancestral links. The Harlem Renaissance encouraged Black artists to express such solidarity through their creative endeavor. Music became one of the most dynamic expressions of their longing for a sense of community and a distinctive voice. Although these movements were not similar, they were linked with each other in some way.

In his essay, "The Black Arts Poets," William Cook supports this notion of the inseparable linkage between these movements expressing strong African-American nationalistic

solidarity and the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s. Similar correspondence was discernible in the 1890s and in the 1920s. But there is a gradual and progressive refinement of nationalistic feelings since their creative expression in the 1890s. Cook asserts that the emergence of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s is a more refined resurgence of these earlier movements as it "was marked by a more unified and coherent ideology and aesthetic" (674). Theodore Draper also corroborates Cook's view by suggesting that Black nationalism that emerged in the early 1960s in the United States "is not something new; it is 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). He says further, "Other nationalisms have, at bottom, a persuasively simple basis. They rest on a demand for sovereignty or self-rule in a particular territory"(Draper 51). Harold Cruse in his book *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967) makes a very significant observation when he says, "The American Negro is wedded to America and does not want to return to his ancestral Africa except in fancy, perhaps"(555). Draper draws a conclusion from Cruse that the "special function" of the Negro intellectual is cultural that "hinges on the *ethnic,* rather than the racial, character of the American Negro problem" (emphasis by Cruse; Draper 50).

3. Black Nationalism of the 1960s:

The emergence of black "nationalism" in the 1960s in its most forceful and militant form as a socio-political and literary movement is undoubtedly one of the most significant events in the history of African-American people. But this robust spirit of nationalism did not occur sporadically; as we have sketched, it has been an integral part of the struggle of the Blacks for self-expression since the days of slavery. However, the radical spirit of the 1960s helped this nationalism grow into a powerful movement. The politics of black nationalism received tremendous support from the writers and artists of the period, who defined their aesthetics in

political terms and tempered politics with aesthetics. The African-American playwright was especially at the center of the movement, and made use of contemporary material in terms of its linkage with an evolving tradition in which history and folklore were integral parts. The numerous Negro musicals in the 1920s and 1930s along with the dramatic efforts by such playwrights as Ridgely Torrence, who provided inspiration for the playwrights in the 1960s. For example, Langston Hughes's *Mulatto* (1935), according to Waters Turpin, "unconsciously looked backward to Ridgely Torrence's 'Granny Maumee' through its heroine and the general circumstances of plot"(15). Turpin considers Paul Green's dramatization of Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* as a counter toward the stereotypical portrayal in primitive terms: "Its major achievement was its serving as a counter-weight on American stage against the depiction of the Negro in primitivistically exotic terms, showing him, rather, as a product of socio-economic determinism"(60).

Three startling events occurred around mid-1950s which, according to A. P. Davis and Redding Saunders, "set the political tone, established the emotional climate, influenced the choice and treatment of literary themes" (567) and accelerated the African-American struggle for freedom and fight against racial injustice. The first concerned the Supreme Court judgement of May 17, 1954 on the Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education case in favor of desegregation of public schools. The second involved the case of Rosa Parks who refused to give up her seat to a white man in a crowded bus in Montgomery, Alabama on December 5, 1955. This incident led to a yearlong bus-boycott, which gave rise to civil rights movements that eventually changed the course of American history. Finally the Supreme Court ruled that segregation in a public bus was unconstitutional. The third incident took place on February 1, 1960, in Greensboro, North Carolina, where four students from the predominantly Negro Technical and Agricultural College walked into the Woolworth store, were refused service

because they had taken seats at the lunch counter which served only whites, but they sat there until the closing time. This situation led to large-scale demonstration in which both the Black and white activists took part. "These events," according to Davis and Saunders, "increased the momentum and expanded the dimensions of what has been described as a black revolution. Beginning with a nonviolent demand for racial equality, conflicting ideas about methods and immediate objectives soon developed"(568). As a result, the differences between the Black middle class assimilationists who favored absorption into the mainstream culture and the majority of young black nationalists became widely pronounced. These young black nationalists emphasized the need for a distinct black culture to counter these integrationist forces. According to Reed, "Cultural nationalism... contends that black people possess a culture, style of life, world view, and aesthetic values distinctly different from white Americans"(50). This urge became manifest in a movement that came to be called the Black Arts Movement.

In their book *Cavalcade: Negro American Writing from 1970 to the Present,* A. P. Davis and Redding Saunders have pointed out the generational conflict between the integrationists and the nationalists and the emergence of the Black Arts Movement. They observe:

> While the integrationists and assimilationists fell relatively silent, the attitudes and point of view of the militants dominated the young writers of the period. Much of their writing was ostensibly directed only to a black audience and was able to appear, when examined in one frame of reference, anti-intellectual, anti-establishment, and anti-white. It aimed at new forms, new themes, and even new language.... These writers strove for a 'black aesthetic,' constituted of principles which were never formally

> expressed, since they were known intuitively and based on life experiences shared by all the artists who agreed upon them. (568)

Larry Neal's essay, "The Black Arts Movement," published in *The Drama Review* of summer 1968 is considered the manifesto of the Movement. The following passage sums up its program and orientation:

> Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept.... The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics. (29)

Neal further says, "Black Power is a natural response to the nationalist strivings of the masses of black America. It is implicitly based on the concept of nationhood... It supplies the black theorist and activist with a new set of political alternatives.... It is important, therefore, that the political goals of the movement be expanded" ("Visions" 138). Addison Gayle also corroborates this definition by his concept of the "Black Aesthetic." In the introduction of his monumental work *The Black Aesthetic* (1971), edited by him, he wrote, "The Black Aesthetic... is a corrective—a means of helping black people out of the polluted mainstream of Americanism"(Quoted in Harper 235).

The most important figure in the Black Arts Movement was Amiri Baraka. His writings and political activism have contributed substantially to the consolidation of Black Power through a harmonious blending of art and politics. Defining the function of the Black Arts Movement, he writes:

> The "Blackness" of the Black Arts Movement was the attempt to restore the national priorities of the Afro-American nation and oppressed nationality to the art of the black artists. The art had to be an extension of the people themselves, involved with them, expressing their lives and minds with the collective fire of actual life committed to the necessary struggle and revolutionary transformation that we need in the real world! ("Class Struggle" 8)

Thus the emergence of the Black Arts Movement in the early 1960s marks the beginning of the cultural nationalism, the strongest form of Black nationalism which boosted up the process of raising the consciousness of the Blacks in America. It emerged in a militant form but gradually took what Reed calls the conservative form the supporters of which "maintain that Afro-Americans are one of many subcultures that make up American society"(Reed 51).

4. African-American Theatre and Drama:

The Origin:

African-American drama has its roots in oral stage performances as well as in dance drama that the Blacks brought with them as slaves from their mother country. According to Elizabeth Brown-Gillory, "Black playwriting in America is directly linked to African theatrics" and the oral drama "was transferred to American soil by enslaved Africans" (1). The slaves entertained their white masters even on the ships transporting them with shows, which comprised songs, dances and drums. As Harrison observes, "From these slave theatricals sprang the minstrel show, which remained popular for decades" [even after the emergence of African-American formal drama] as "the movement from the oral tradition to the written form was a very gradual one" (Quoted in Brown-Gillory 2). But during its first one hundred years the American professional theatre rigidly rejected black performers. As a result, for almost a

century and a half, white audience did not see any blacks on the stage; they saw only the sentimental, melodramatic, or mocking images of Blacks created by white mimics.

Although a white dramatist created a role for a black in *The Padlock* in 1769, there was no play written by a writer of African ancestry in America until the end of the 19th century. The Broadway audiences continued to enjoy black musical shows by such blacks as Will Marion Cook, Rosamond Johnson, James Weldon Johnson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Bob Cole. These shows created black stereotypes such as the Buffoon, the Tragic Mulatto, the Christian Slave, the Primitive, and the Black Beast (Turner 4-5). A play entitled *The Drama of King Shotaway*, fashioned by African Americans, was produced for the first time in New York in the African Grove Theatre in 1821. The African Grove Theatre developed out of Mr. William Henry Brown's tea garden under the leadership of the leading actor James Hewlett. The establishment of this Theater came to be seen as a potential threat to the Park Theater run by the white enterprise, run by one Stephen Price. In 1823, the authorities as a place of public nuisance closed down the African Grove Theater. But this theatre had already made its contribution to the genesis of the Black theatre and drama. It was this Theater which produced Ira Aldridge, who after his migration to London, became a stellar attraction as a Shakespearean actor. William Branch comments:

> In initiating an African American theatrical tradition that refused to accommodate to pressure, he [Mr. Brown] ennobled himself and his peers, that is no less vital today as it was in 1823—a tradition which, though oft-times sputtering, gasping and wheezing, has managed, against both the usual artistic odds and those additional roadblocks created by prejudice, to survive and occasionally even to flourish in the nearly two centuries succeeding. ("I" xii).

Loften Mitchell has chronicled in his *Black Drama: The Story of the American Negro in the Theatre* the long and detailed history of African-American Theater since the closing down of the African American Grove. Except for *King Shotaway*, whose authorship is credited to Mr. Brown though there is no concrete evidence for this, there seems to be no record of any theatrical production of dramatic works by Black Americans in the major part of the nineteenth century. Before the Civil War, however, an escaped slave named William Wells Brown developed an interest in legitimate theater to propagate abolition. Thus although the African-American theatrical tradition had begun with *King Shotaway*, the "first African-American playwright of record," according to Brown-Gillory, "is William Wells Brown, whose play, *The Escape: or a Leap for Freedom,* written in 1858, marks the impetus from dramatic oral tradition to formal playwrighting"(2). *The Escape,* like much of the mid-nineteenth century literature, was a melodramatic closet drama and was not produced until 1972. Brown-Gillory says further that it "levels an indictment against slavery" and "is the first attempt in the line of protest plays that would dominate early black plays and that made an appeal for justice for African Americans"(2). While Ira Aldridge tried to popularize black themes in Europe with the adaptation of a French play named *The Black Doctor*, an African-American named Victor Sejour from New Orleans (1817-74) did the opposite by dealing with white themes in his staging of twenty one "white" plays. Besides, William Easton, a Black playwright from Haiti, wrote two verse plays, De*ssalines* and *Christophe*, which were about some leading Black revolutionaries against Napoleon. Around this time, in 1890s, such Black entrepreneurs in the USA as Bob Cole, William Marion Cook, J. Rosamund Johnson and Paul Lawrence Dunbar wrote and successfully produced a series of musicals for white audiences. These musicals, A *Trip to Coontown, The Octoroons, The Shoefly Regiment* and *Jes Lak White Folks* tried to break the stranglehold of minstrelsy and brought for the first time Black actors on to the stage.

The nineteenth century thus provided a necessary context for the emergence of Black drama, which appeared regularly from the beginning of the next century. In 1901, a school principal named Joseph S. Cotter Sr. from Louisville, Kentucky published a full-length play entitled *Caleb the Degenerate* in which he contrasted the economic philosophy of Booker T. Washington with the backwardness of Black Americans. The play implied that Booker T. Washington's notion of economic independence for Blacks was somewhat utopian, as it did not take into account the reality of the living conditions of average Blacks. The man who opposed vehemently Washington's accommodationist philosophy was W. E. B. DuBois, whose play *The Star of Ethiopia* (1913), which was staged in major American cities before Black audiences, made the Blacks aware of the spectacular history of their achievements spanning continents. William Branch observes thus about the play's impact: "It was a studied attempt by the preeminent African American scholar and activist to counter some of the many negative images of Blacks then constantly encountered in America's press, literature, theater and emerging film industry... by offering a sweeping overview of Black accomplishments from ancient Egypt to the present era"("I" xv).

DuBois, who is better known for his *Souls of Black Folk*, was a patron of drama and theatre and in fact encouraged younger playwrights by offering them prizes in drama competitions. As the editor of *The Crisis,* the magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), he called for combating the negative portrayals of Blacks through corrective measures. He also founded in Harlem a theater group called the Krigwa Players. *The Was*hington, D. C. branch of the NAACP, produced *Rachel* by Angelina Grimke, the first play to result from Dr. DuBois's call. James V. Hatch says that this event was the first attempt to "use the stage for race propaganda in order to enlighten the American people relative to the lamentable condition of ten millions of Colored citizens in this free

republic"(Quoted in Branch xv). *Rachel*, which is believed to be the first straight play (i.e. non-musical), deals with the failure of a middle-class African-American family to prospect in a racist and America. In it the young woman protagonist decides to remain forever loveless and childless rather than bring into the world a child destined to be "blighted... blasted by the white man's prejudice." From this somewhat controversial beginning, drama as viable form for African-American playwrights took shape systematically during the early decades of the twentieth century until its absorption into the cultural energy of the Harlem Renaissance.

The Harlem Renaissance:

The early decades of the present century, especially the 1920s and the early 1930s, are known as the period of the Harlem Renaissance or, as Alaine Locke termed it, the "New Negro Renaissance" when the African-American creativity emerged in full abundance. This was the first significant event in the history of the African-American theatre and drama. Baraka defines the Harlem Renaissance as the

> maturation of an urban Afro-American intelligentsia, symbolizing the movement of large numbers of the black masses out of the Afro-American nation in the old Black Belt South into the rest of the United States, as an oppressed minority; transforming from largely Southern rural and agricultural and people, to the present day when almost half of the Black masses live in the North, Midwest, and West, in urban centers, as part of an industrial working class.... ("Class Struggle" 6).

The Harlem Renaissance, according to Bracey, Meier and Rudwick, "apart from its evident cultural import, can be considered in sociopolitical terms as representing the culmination of a wave of black nationalist sentiment that lasted from the 1880s until the onset of the Depression" ("I" xi). During this period, they argue, "appeals to race pride and race unity became commonplace, and separate educational, religious, and economic institutions were

more and more widely advocated" ("I," xi). The tremendous political momentum provided by Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa theory led to the homogenization of African-American community which saw the necessity for consolidating their position in the USA and to develop a distinctive literature of their own as a way of justifying their special cultural status. Thus the Harlem Renaissance turned the political force of Garveyite movement into a creative direction. As we have already suggested, this direction led to the emergence of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s. As Harper says, "If we recognize the fundamental significance of this intraracial division to such black nationalism as is represented in the Black Arts Project, then it seems to me that we are much closer to understanding the full social import of the nationalist imperative"(25).

According to Elizabeth Brown-Gillory, two occurrences marked a revolution in black theatre and drama in America and ushered in the Harlem Renaissance: first, the publication of *The Crisis* magazine edited by W. E. B. DuBois by the newly formed National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1910; and, second, Ridgely Torrence's New York production in 1917 of *Three Plays for a Negro Theatre* which included *Granny Maumee, The Rider of Dreams* and, *Simon the Cyrenian* (2). DuBois's *The Crisis* sponsored annual playwriting contests and efforts to create a networking of black authors across the country, especially in New York City, Cleveland, Chicago, and Washington, D. C., many of whom were playwrights desperately in need of an audience. Some of the plays written for *The Crisis* competitions were short one-act plays written for high schools, colleges and little theater groups. Often they were by Black Women schoolteachers reacting to the lack of educational materials in school. Some of them, according to William Branch, were

> in the category of what became known as "Negro folk plays,"—attempts to bring to the stage aspects of a Southern rural background which most Black Americans then

> shared. Some were comedies, imbued with rich folk humor or scathing satire, while others sought to document the historical record of Black heroes and heroines. Some grappled with the intense racism of the period, protesting against lynching—of both the body and the spirit—by the dominant society, thus earning the title "protest drama." ("I" xvi).

By the end of the 1920s, hundreds of such plays had been entered in the playwriting contests of *The Crisis* and the Urban League's *Opportunity* magazine. Few were actually produced or published, but scripts like Alice Dunbar Nelson's *Mine Eyes Have Seen*, Georgia Douglas Johnson's *A Sunday Morning in the South*, Willis Richardson's *The Chip Woman's Fortune*, Randolph Edmonds's *Nat Turner*, and those by many others demonstrate the growing confidence and purpose of Black dramatists. During the 1920s as many as four plays by African-American authors found their way to the Great White Way. This suggests that the Black dramatists have at last found their audience and institutional support. In 1923 Richardson's one-act play became the first drama by an African American to be produced on Broadway. It was followed two years later by Garland Anderson's *Appearances*, a full-length play in which a Black man was falsely accused of raping a white woman. An African-American actor, Frank Wilson, tried his hand at writing a play called *Meek Mose* (which was later retitled as *Brother Mose*), which was produced on Broadway for a brief period in 1928. The fourth play, *Harlem*, by the Harlem Renaissance writer Wallace Thurman (along with the white writer Jourdan Rapp) also enjoyed a modest run in 1929. This play, as William Branch remarks, gave "white theater-goers a voyeuristic view of life in what was then regarded as the 'Black capitol of the world' "("I" xvi).

During the 1920s and 1930s African-Americans freed themselves from the influence of stereotypes only when they wrote plays intended exclusively for black audiences in community

theatres. Even during the economic depression of the 1930s, African-American playwrights were active both in the downtown theatres as well as in community theatres. As a result of their continuous involvement in theatrical production, Black writers and actors were given incentive by the Federal Theatre Project through grants channelized through Lafayette Theatre in Harlem and Afro-American community theatres. Those which were the beneficiaries of the Federal Theater Project were W. E. B. DuBois's *Haiti*, Frank Wilson's *Walk Together, Children* (1936), Rudolph Fisher's *Conjure Man Dies*, and Turner Ward's *Big White Fog* (1938), and *Our Lan'* (1946). The fact that many Black artists received the support from the Government for their plays and productions indicates that they were already a part of American cultural scene and not outside its ambience. However, there were some who were operating outside the Federal Theatre Project, responsible for the continuity of Black theatrical tradition independent of official support, Langston Hughes is one such person, who has occupied a prominent place in the history of Black theatre. After an unsuccessful attempt at writing a play entitled *Mule Bone* in collaboration with the folklorist Zora Neale Hurston, Hughes wrote his own play *Cross: A Play of the Deep South*, later retitled as *Mulatto*, based upon his poem "Cross" on the theme of the tragic mulatto. *Mulatto*, a hoary tale of lust, revenge and miscegenation in the early twentieth century South, was taken to Broadway in 1935 and became the longest running play by an African American until overshadowed by Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, almost twenty five years later.

During the period between World War I and World War II, some white dramatists tried to create realistic portrayals of Afro-American characters, but only succeeded in creating new stereotypes. Ridgely Torrence's *Granny Maumee*, William Vaughn Moody's *The Faith Healer* (1909), Eugene O'Neill's *The Dreamy Kid* (1919) and *The Emperor Jones* (1920) are some examples of plays by whites which created Black stereotypical figures. In *Simon the*

Cyrenian (1917) Ridgely Torrence introduced an idealized black protagonist who carried a cross for Jesus; in the *The Rider of Dreams* he created an archetype of an Indolent Dreamer in the form of a protagonist who wished to gain wealth without work. The white playwrights who wrote plays presenting black characters seemed to stress the fixed opinion that blacks would fail if they attempted to live according to white men's standards (Turner 6). In O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1924) the protagonist is a middle-class Negro who fails at the bar examination and dwindles into the sexless protection of his white wife. In *In Abraham's Bosom* (1924) Paul Green dramatized Abe McCrannie's failure to educate his people. These conventional stereotypes created by the white playwrights of the Blacks became responsible for changing the consciousness of the Black dramatists in the direction of their creative potential and strategies of representation. Darwin T. Turner remarks in this respect: "While the white dramatists' representations of African-Americans were dancing across the professional stages of Broadway, black dramatists were finding their outlets only in Afro-American community theatres" (7). The growth of Afro-American plays was possible only by the professional groups that African-Americans had formed: the Lafayette Players in New York, the Gilpin Players in Cleveland, and the Krigwa Little Theatre movement organized and developed by W. E. B. DuBois.

This was a crucial period for the African-American playwrights because they had to write "for two audiences—the uptown Harlem audiences and the downtown Broadway audiences" (Turner 8). For the downtown audiences they had little choice but to imitate the images already provided by the white dramatists with some modifications, if needed. But gradually black playwrights freed themselves from these constrictions by creating positive images of the Blacks. It was Willis Richardson who was the first playwright to present idealized black characters. In his three plays, *The Chip Woman's Fortune* (1923), *The Flight*

of the Natives (1927), and *The Black Horsemen* (1929), he "glorified qualities, which he considered intrinsic virtues of the black man: dignity, nobility, and courage (Turner 8). Another significant playwright, Langston Hughes also created positive images of the Blacks. In *Little Ham* (1935), he transformed the Carefree Primitive into a Harlem sporting man; in *Mulatto* (1935), he ironically transformed the Black male's characteristic docile nature into aggressivity. Finally in 1941, Richard Wright and Paul Green transfigured the Black Beast into Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of *Native Son.*

As the spirit of Harlem Renaissance began to ebb with the emergence of 1940s, Black drama took a new form, the form of caricature. It took upon itself the function of caricaturing the accommodationist tendencies of the Black bourgeoisie. Abraham Hill's *On Strivers Row* is a farce about Harlem Black bourgeoisie. Abram Hill co-founded the American Negro Theater with actors Frederick O'Neal and Austin Briggs-Hall. The 1940s provided a convenient transition for a fresh upsurge of Black drama in the 1950s and early 1960s. The low-keyed approach of caricature and farce made the subsequent playwrights aware that the strength of their art would lay in exploring the inner linguistic resources of their culture as a way of correcting misconceptions about them created by white stereotypes. Humor, irony, satire and burlesque are some of the devices they employed as strategies of revolt. Thus, a subtle shift was taking place in their conception of theatre and drama from that of protest to one of revolt.

The 1950s:

In the early 1950s Afro-American drama came of age professionally with the effort by a young playwright named Louis Paterson. His *Take a Giant Step* (1953) is concerned with the problems that a Black boy faces in growing up in a white neighborhood. Paterson's realism in the portrayal of his protagonist and in the depiction of the racial division of the country along Black/white lines gives the message to the Black dramatist that in order to be authentic he/she

must use local elements without any romantic exaggeration through primitivism or exotic fancy. The Blacks, as the play implies, understand that they should grow alone and should not try to imitate the cultural the values of the whites. Like *Take a Giant Step,* William Branch's *A Medal for Willie* (1951), Alice Childress's *Trouble in Mind* (1955), Loften Mitchell's *A Land Beyond the River* (1957), and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), deal with the processes through which the Black characters try to come to grips with their predicament and to learn how to transform their adversity to some sort of triumph. The verisimilitude in characterization and incident, set by *Take a Giant Step,* continued in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun.* Hansberry's play presents a broad spectrum of Afro-American reality with its focus on a single family, the Youngers. Hansberry's ability lies, argues Turpin, in capturing "the mood of a time and of a group" and "in utilizing the universal group- survival motif"(19). But the real significance of *A Raisin in the Sun,* according to Branch, lies in educating both blacks and whites with its combination of "intra-family conflicts with a black-white confrontation" (xxi). Hansberry both entertained and educated the African-American people about how to create conditions for the whites to stay in harmony with Blacks in the latter's surroundings.

Hansberry's play represents a significant step in the way drama by Blacks has emerged as an instrument of their power and assertion without causing any embarrassment to whites. As a form of representation of their cultural values it has arrived at a stage when it is deeply involved with their rich potential of the revolutionary tradition of the Black race inherent in its music and folklore. Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* gave a new direction to African-American drama and initiated the spirit of revolutionary theatre which the playwrights of the 1960s took up with greater zeal and made it the integral part of the Theatre movement. Ossie Davis, an excellent actor himself, produced *Purlie Victorious* in 1961 as an example of how a

Black man could overcome the tribulations of his life by exploiting the richness of humor and laughter available in plenty in the arsenal of Black culture. According to Waters Turpin, "Anyone with a sense of the history of the Western theatre should have no difficulty in recognizing the dramatic lineage of this work... [as well as between] Mr. Davis and Aristophanes...." (Turpin 19). Davis echoes Aristophanes's horror of war in his disgust with the American racism through his satirical treatment in the play.

It was at this juncture in the history of the African-American drama and theatre that an explosive beginning of a very important event took place. It was the confluence of Black Nationalism with the Black Arts Movement led by Amiri Baraka (then known as LeRoi Jones) and supported by a group of "younger playwrights." Ossie Davis had already set the course for the satirical tone of drama, a course that was adopted by the younger playwrights. "But whereas Davis rises to the laughter of a Juvenile as he surveys the American scene," observes Turpin, "his younger contemporaries rise in their wrath"(20).

This was the beginning of the 1960s, a tumultuous era in American culture. The playwrights of the Black Arts Movement joined the radical politics and aesthetics of mainstream culture and used the opportunity for challenging the misconceptions and conventional notions about Blacks perpetuated by the white Americans. In the process, they also tried to develop in their work positive images of Blacks through re-definition of Blackness and its intricate color symbolism. James Baldwin, whose *The Amen Corner* (1954) was not much noticed when it came out, published a powerful play named *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964), a publication which helped in the resurrection of *The Amen Corner*. Susan Sontag, in her essay "Going to Theatre, etc." comments on the aesthetic merits of the playwright: "Baldwin's plays, like his essays and novels, have undoubtedly touched a nerve other than political. Only by tapping the sexual insecurity that grips most educated white Americans

could Baldwin's virulent rhetoric have seemed so reasonable"(391). *Blues for Mr. Charlie*, which takes place in a small Southern town, opens with the death of its brash tormented Negro jazz musician hero, Richard, and ends with the acquittal of his white murderer, a resentful inarticulate young buck named Lyle, and the moral collapse of the local liberal, Parnell. Sontag further comments: "What is being demonstrated is not the social guilt of the white, but their inferiority as human beings"(390-391). Further, "In *Blues for Mister Charlie,* Broadway liberalism has been vanquished by Broadway racism.... It is essential, dramatically, that the white man wins. Murder justifies the author's rage and disarms the white audience, who have to learn what's coming to *them* (her emphasis)" (Sontag 390). The apparent racial conflict is not the subject of the play; it is, instead, the urge of the American Negro for the recognition of his masculinity, which the white world has robbed of him. "The truth is that," says Sontag, "*Blues for Mister Charlie* isn't really about what it claims to be about. It is supposed to be about racial strife. But it is really about the anguish of tabooed sexual longings, about the crisis of identity, which comes from confronting these longings, and about the rage and destructiveness (often self-destructiveness) by which one tries to surmount this crisis. It has, in short, a psychological subject"(393). Critics have seen much similarity between *Blues for Mister Charlie* and LeRoi Jones's *Dutchman* in their psychological realism and technical innovation. Although "*Dutchman* is a better play than *Blues for Mister Charlie,*" according to Gerald Weales, both "carried the new black militancy to the stage"(430-31).

In the mid-1960s, as Jones changed his name to Baraka after accepting Islam, the black theatre began to be divided into two clear directions: the first, the Negro Ensemble Company which was cosmopolitan in character in its audience composition; the second, the New Lafayette Theatre in Harlem which was exclusivist in its emphasis on Black audience. Douglas Turner Ward, Lonne Elder III, and Adrienne Kennedy were the representatives of the first

group. Ward's *Happy Ending* and *Day of Absence,* both produced in 1965 "are satirical in tone" but, according to Gerald Weales, "little more than extended jokes, almost as broad as Ossie Davis's *Purlie Victorious* (1961)"(432). Elder's *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* (1969), Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964), and two one-acts, *Cities in Bezique* (1969) are complex and allusive in their use of the techniques of the traditional avant-garde to work in the service of African-American aestheticism. Ed Bullins was the most prominent playwright of the second group. An exponent of separatist theatre, he as editor of *Black Theatre* and in association with the New Lafayette, produced *The Electronic Nigger and others* (1969) as exemplary plays to touch the inmost conscience of his Black race. His other plays, *The Duplex* (1970), *The Fabulous Miss Marie* and *Four Dynamite Plays* (1971) (which included *It Bees Dat Way, Death List, The Pig Pen* and *Night of the Beast*) and *The Taking of Miss Janie* (1975) carried forward the tradition of separatist theatre he had begun with *The Electronic Nigger and Other Plays*. Between 1967 and 1980 at least twenty-five of Bullins's plays were produced. As Weales remarks, "Perhaps most representative of his drama are those plays—*In New England Winter* (1967), *In the Wine Time* (1968), *Miss Marie, The Duplex*—part of a projected cycle of twenty, in which, through recurring characters, he explores black society, celebrating the vigor of the people and at the same time showing their acquiescence in their own situation" (Weales 432). Although Bullins started as a revolutionary playwright with focus upon the separateness of Blacks and on their struggle for self-expression, he gradually shifted his focus on issues, which were general in nature in the context of the situation of Blacks in the American cultural mosaic. This shift can be explained as symptomatic of a general shift in the perception of Blacks from questions of separate identity to larger questions of national self-definition.

The 1960s:

Larry Neal is perhaps the most outspoken Black theorist of "The Black Arts Movement" in the 1960s. His seminal essay "The Black Arts Movement" defines the nature of this Movement in clear terms:

> Recently the two movements [the Black Power Movement and the Black Arts Movement] have begun to merge: the political values inherent in the Black Power concept are now finding concrete expression in the aesthetics of Afro-American dramatists, poets, choreographers, musicians, and novelists.... The two movements postulate that there are in fact and in spirit two Americas—one black, one white. (29-30)

This sense of dichotomy between two cultures that Neal mentions in his essay was strong in the beginning of the Black Arts Movement. But as the movement matured, it shed some of its earlier virulence and became somewhat soft in its tone toward the whites. According to William Cook, these five texts were central to the development of the Black Arts Movement: *Black Fire* (1968), edited by LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal; *The New Black Poetry* (1969), edited by Clarence Major; *The Black Aesthetic* (1971), edited by Addison Gayle; *Black Poets and Prophets* (1972), edited by Woodie King and Earl Anthony; and *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1973), edited by Stephen Henderson. Ron Karenga's essay, "Black Cultural Nationalism," centers on the place of Black Arts in the revolutionary struggle. Black art, argues Karenga, must possess three qualities: it must "expose the enemy, praise the people, and support the revolution"(Qtd. in Cook 676). The New Black art must also be a collective art, one that "must move with the masses and be moved by the masses" (676).

Finally the Black art, says Cook, as described by Karenga will be committed to revolution and change. Karenga's notion of "Black Cultural Nationalism" observes Cook, "represents an important aspect of the theory of a black aesthetic that was developed in the late sixties by a group of artists, most of whom were in active collaboration on the development of that aesthetic" (Cook 678). Imamu Amiri Baraka's essay, "A Black Value System" in King and Anthony, *Black Poets and Prophets,* with the sub-title "The Theory, Practice and Esthetics of the Pan-Africanist Revolution" is very important in relation to the Black Arts Movement. In this essay, Baraka focuses on the seven principles of the Kawaida (autonomy or the traditional black practices): Umoja (unity); Kujichagulia (self-determination); Ujima (collective work and responsibility); Ujama (cooperative economics); Nia (purpose); Kuumba (creativity); and, Tmani (faith). These principles are offered as a constructive alternative to Euro-American constructs, and remain at the center of Kwanzaa, an African celebration that has displaced or at least rivaled Christmas in many African-American communities. Baraka assumed a very important role at this stage in the process of raising racial consciousness among the blacks in America. While Maulana Ron Karenga and Malcolm and other political leaders sought to attack the counter-revolutionary role played by the bourgeoisie in the ongoing Black Liberation Movement, the African-American writer, especially the playwright, assumed the central position in the Black Arts Movement—a movement inseparably linked to the Black Liberation Movement. While both the political leaders and the artists had the same goal to work to i.e. towards social change for black liberation, the methods and tactics used by the political activists were different from those used by the artists. Maulana Karenga, America's chief exponent of Black Cultural Nationalism, says Charles Peavy, "has consistently stressed the importance of a cultural revolution preceding any attempt at revolutionary social change"(40). The role an artist was supposed to perform in this complex task of fight against oppression and injustice

depended much on the temperament of the artist and the ideologies he believed in, although several other factors also either helped or hampered the function of an artist. But the first thing an artist or a political leader was supposed to do was to correct the black man's image of himself in his mind. Peavy asserts:

> The total concept of Black Power necessitates a change in the black man's image of himself, for until this is accomplished no radical reordering of the existing social structure is possible. The contemporary black artist has accepted the role he must play in this battle for the minds of men by supplying through his art the Black Consciousness or Black pride which will free the black man from the psychological enslavement he has endured for more than two centuries in an essentially racist, white society. (40)

Satire, both in the tradition of Juvenal and Horace, was one of the most important devices employed by contemporary African-American playwrights. This satire was used both against the whites as well as the Blacks. But most often this satire was employed against the follies and foibles of the Blacks. Many of the artists in the Black theatre developed by the Black Arts Movement speak directly to the black audiences. "In drama," says Larry Neal, "LeRoi Jones represents the most advanced aspects of the movement. He is its prime mover and chief designer"("BAM 33). Baraka's contribution to Black drama and theatre was immense. He was perhaps the most prominent playwright of the time who through his commitment to drama and theatre in particular and Black literature and politics in general brought about a significant transformation to the spirit of nationalism which was already beginning to develop in the minds of the American Blacks. As a prime mover of the Black Arts Movement, Baraka turned the movement against the integrationist and counter-revolutionary forces and redirected it toward a revolutionary aesthetics. As Andrea Rushing remarks:

> One of the most dramatic consequences of the political and cultural Black Nationalism of the 60's was a searing black examination of African-American culture, which pronounced much of it hopelessly integrationist, irrelevant, and counter-revolutionary. Black family and black religion were focal in this re-appraisal. Radicals pronounced them hopelessly corrupt; revisionists concentrated on their resilience and adaptability and their ability to sustain African-American life and hope against colossal obstacles. We searched for our true black selves down myriad roads lined with gelees, tikis, naturals, and dashikis. We re-assessed rural Southern black life and became intensely curious about historical and contemporary Africa. (548)

Baraka has repeatedly shown his concern for the liberation of the blacks in America in whatever he did and wrote. Keeping pace with the avant-garde spirit of the time, he never ceased his theatrical experimentation from giving expression to his objectives. Thus the 1960s marks the culmination of Black Nationalism—a long-sought-for merger of the political and aesthetic theories. The African-American writer, especially the playwright, played a key role in this splendid fusion.

The African-American playwright during the 1960s turned to the resources of native culture derived from African roots for material for theatre, unlike his European or white American counterparts who depended on Euro-centric tradition of white supremacy. An examination of the plays of Amiri Baraka and Ed Bullins will support this observation. Ed Bullins says, "The reason that critics—Black/white/American —cannot decipher many of the symbols of Black theater is because the artists are consciously migrating to non-Western references"("I" 8). The seven plays by Ed Bullins published in 1973 in *The Theme Is Blackness* (1973) are "non-representational in form and deal with a wide variety of themes both traditional in black literature and specifically relevant to contemporary black

experience"(Canaday 40). This shift in Bullins's dramatic style from conventional forms to what Canaday calls the "collective form" can be attributed to the impact on him of the Black Arts Movement.

"The necessary condition for evolution, furthermore," adds Canaday, "is a community with its members sharing a common identity, healed of alienation caused by caste, class, or self-interest. In Ed Bullins's own terms, the creation of a nation" (46). Like the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement prepared an excellent ground for bringing together artists irrespective of class or color to a community of shared interests. This community transcends the limited sphere of activity of an exclusive group and tends to embrace larger questions cutting across color line. This subtle transformation of the movement from its earlier emphasis on exclusivity to an openness and resilience provides a smooth transition from the radical Sixties to a relatively quieter decade in the Seventies. Evaluating this function of the Black Arts Movement, Baraka wrote: "The Black Arts Movement had an impact similar to the Harlem Renaissance; it influenced a whole generation of artists around the world... not just black and Third World artists, but European and Euro-American artists. The emphasis on a people shaped highly oral, intensely direct statements, in various media" ("Class Struggle" 8). Thus the tremendous impact of the Black Arts Movement on the artists of the entire world could be said to have changed the very basis of the relationships among the people of the world.

The 1970s:

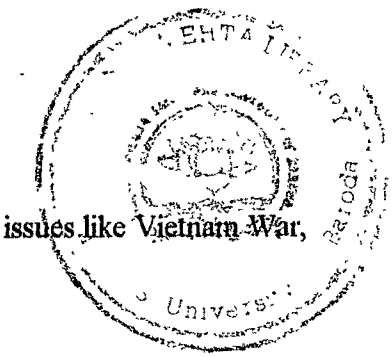
During the 1970s the nationalistic fervor created by the Black Arts playwrights, especially Baraka and Bullins continued with some modification with the younger playwrights like Ntozake Shange and others. In fact the literary upsurge created by the Black Arts Movement affected social and political changes involving the fate of Blacks. William Branch rightly

observes in the introduction to his *Black Thunder: An Anthology of Contemporary African American Drama* (1993) that the profuse energy produced during the sixties continued during the seventies also and the African-American plays "reflected the events, moods and changing life-styles"(xxvi) of the period. He further elaborates on this aspect:

> The vitality and dynamism that marked the great burst in the growth of African American Theater during the sixties swept onto the 1970s, at first seemingly without abatement. Funds tapped from anti-poverty programs and foundations had resulted in the establishment and flowering of Black Theater groups and organizations from coast to coast. Black playwrights were being nurtured to some extent with grants and college residencies. Scholarly assessments of their]... work began appearing in critical dissertations, leading journals, and anthologies.... As opportunities for college enrollment by African Americans increased markedly, "Black Theater" courses made their debuts on college and university campuses often accompanied by Black Theater workshops which produced plays from the growing Black Theater repertoire. (xxv)

Although the momentum created by the Black Arts Movement was still in full force, some critics were disappointed by its effect. Gerald Weales saw in the direction of the African-American drama a counter to the hopes of the community. He remarks: "During the 1970s the pattern of play-going among blacks changed. In increasing numbers, they began to attend the commercial theatres in large cities"(432). This phenomenon indicates that the black drama has at last crossed over to a wide territory from its restricted space and has joined the mainstream theatre without losing its focus and concerns.

One of the new features of the Black drama in the Seventies was that it was now shared by both men and women, and this change resulting from the distribution of gender in the constitution of Black playwrights has significant impact on the coming decades. The issues



that concerned the community are no longer local; they were national issues like Vietnam War, Civil Rights, place of women in society and freedom of expression.

In the mid-1970s, while Baraka, Bullins and other male playwrights were still writing plays for the black theatre, a new voice—black and female—was heard in Ntozake Shange, a voice that emerged in consonance with the Women's Liberation Movement. While writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and others gave a very powerful expression to this voice in fiction, Ntozake Shange gave Black theatre a distinctive female character. Since the production of Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1959, there was hardly a play by a black female playwright of her caliber in the New Black Theatre which was largely dominated by the male playwrights. Although black women have been writing for the theatre in the United States since the later half of the nineteenth century, the Establishment did not properly recognize them. Women's Lib Movement, although dominated largely by white women, tried to bring the neglected women writers back to the forefront of critical discussions and assessment. A prolific black writer, Shange who has also produced poetry and fiction, is best-known for her four dramatic works which appeared in the late 1970s of which her choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1976), is the most well-known. Almost all her works reveal the stark facts of black life—in a country where things are much the same as before—with a splendid fusion of imagination and reality, and from a black woman's perspective. Timpane says, "Writers with whom she is often compared, such as Imamu Amiri Baraka and Nikki Giovanni, seem to speak of a different earlier moment. Where these and other writers attacked the obstacles to black self-realization, Shange's dramas represent the tortured moment of becoming itself, *the* (his emphasis) moment of emergence and discovery"(91). Timpane writes further:

> Shange's work suggests the kind of 'canon' one might design for dramatic works... a canon not of texts but of potential performance events. Perhaps we can say that a text of *colored girls* or *spell # 7* or *boogie woogie landscapes,* like any script for any play, is just a template from which may be spun of a continuing series of performances. (101)

Shange's dramatic works made such a powerful impact in the literary circles that they made everybody look at the African-American literary tradition afresh from an altered perspective. As Peter Bailey says, Shange turned the earlier "theater of despair" to one of life and hope. Shange's work has to be seen in the context of other Black women writers who were trying to address both female and racial issues current at that time. Bruce King has made a significant observation in this respect: "Theatre by women, has itself increased to the point where there are now recognized subdivisions, including feminist performance art, feminist theatre groups and acceptance of possible conflicts in aims between, say, the women playwrights on Broadway... and the more ideologically directed feminist theater.... "(4).

Then, while Shange and other black female writers were still going stronger with their emphatic voices in making the feminist discourse one of the central intertwining cords of black discourse, August Wilson, another strong and daunting male voice in the black theatre attracted the attention of the entire nation through his dramatization of the complex trends of racism prevailing in America. Through his plays he tried to make the Blacks aware of their rich cultural heritage and strong roots, without creating a sense of barrier between Blacks and Whites. Earlier, the plays in the Sixties were mostly confrontationist in posture, but Wilson saw the strength of the Black race within the mainstream of American culture, not without it.

The 1980s:

In the 1980s and the subsequent years African-American theatre suffered financially, "due to the lack of support from the community as well as from the funding agencies such as National Endowment for the Arts which treated the black companies with a kind of 'malign neglect' "(Bailey 21). In his essay, "A Look at the Contemporary Black Theatre Movement," Peter Bailey says that the misrepresentation by the press of community-based theatre was instrumental in the curtailment of funds for the black theatre. But in spite of this funding problem the Black theatre continued to survive and do good work. Bailey is hopeful that "talented, committed, imaginative, and resourceful theater artists such as directors Ernie McClintock, Roger Furman, and Bette Howard; playwrights P.J.Gibson, James De Jongh, Lawrence Holder, along with Richard Wesley and Charles Fuller; and a host of outstanding actors, actresses, choreographers, technicians, and administrators will keep contemporary black theatre on a steady course forward"(21). He thinks that the Black playwright has a task ahead and must try to keep the tradition alive. According to Bailey, African-American playwrights must do more than "tell it like it is." He says further:

> Instead, they strive to tell the whole truth about the people of whom they write, dealing with their strengths as well as their weaknesses, their heroes as well as their outlaws; with Wall Street and international affairs as well as South-Side Chicago and Harlem; with love relationships as well as warped ones; and with the possibility of nuclear war as well as brawls on 125th Street. Theatre artists must use their much-talked-about artistic vision to help people better understand both the world around them and the world of the past. (Bailey 21)

To conclude, the history of the African American drama and theatre shows that there is a continuity of revolutionary spirit and that that spirit is sometimes subdued under external

pressures and sometimes expresses itself in forms of radical manifestations as in the robust sense of nationalism in the 1960s. Kimberly Benston's observation in his essay, "I yam what I am: the topos of un (naming) in Afro-American Literature," about this continuity of African-American literature is extremely pertinent here. "All Afro-American literature," he writes, "may be seen as one vast genealogical poem that attempts to restore continuity to the ruptures or discontinuities imposed by the history of black presence in America"(152). This general statement will also apply to the African-American drama and theatre.

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