Chapter II

Amiri Baraka: From Cultural Nationalism to Marxism and Beyond

Amiri Baraka, formerly known as LeRoi Jones, whose public image is that of an angry man and a Black artist given to violence, "represents the violence and spontaneity of the radical 1960s, when he was at the very core of literature, culture and politics"(Sollors "T" 1). A multi-faceted personality and a powerful literary figure, he has been a tremendous influence on African-American community. A leading spokesman of black cultural nationalism during the late 1960s and early 1970s, Baraka played an important role in the organization of the Congress of African Peoples in 1970. During the same year he also campaigned vigorously for Kenneth Gibson (a political endorsement he later repudiated), who was elected the first black mayor of Newark. He played a key role in the organization of the National Black Political Assembly in 1972. However, these political roles did not negatively affect his involvement in the writing of plays and in their production. On the contrary, his political activities and dramatic activities complemented each other. In the context of the revolutionary tradition in African-American drama, it is fairly convenient to examine Amiri Baraka's contribution as a playwright to the resurgence of Black Nationalism.

With the production of *Dutchman* and *The Slave* in 1964 Baraka emerged as a strong exponent of what is called Black cultural nationalism. Since then he has produced more than twenty-five plays, five collections of poetry (one edited with his wife, Amina Baraka), one novel, a collection of stories and a number of essays on various subjects. Although Baraka himself has theorized about his dramatic works, the theory of signifyin (g) developed in recent years by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. provides a very appropriate tool to re-examine Baraka's works. Gates's theory of "signifying" provides a mode of communication, which has at least a

dual significance: one for the Blacks and the other for the white population. Baraka employs this mode in order to give a special coded message to his Black audience, which operates at a subterranean level of his texts. In a biographical sketch, Richard Barksdale and Kenneth Kinnaman make a very illuminating observation about Baraka: "On his own terms, Baraka must now be understood as a Black magician, a poet-priest-prophet of the re-emerging Black nation, an Imamu. On a more personal level, he has helped many readers to discover or recover their Black selves. To white readers he has revealed the painful reality of their own racism"(747).

A close look at Baraka's life reveals that he has constantly adapted himself to his changing circumstances, a strategy, which was a part of his radical politics of accommodation. In an interview with T. R. Hudson in 1970, Baraka himself called this change a result of self-revelation, and not just a rational decision:

> It wasn't any sudden thing. It was a developing thing... my work kept changing steadily and I kept being aware of how it was changing and what it meant. It was constant self-revelation. It was based on growing, change—like everything else—until one day the whole thing just becomes unbearable in a physical sense and I just cut out. (75)

Beginning in the late fifties as a Beat/Black Mountain poet in the Greenwich Village, Baraka changed himself to a revolutionary playwright in the mid-sixties assuming the new name of Ameer (later Amiri) Baraka in 1968. In 1974, he dropped the title *Imamu*, which he had assumed in 1968, signaling another change in his cultural and political complexion. James Miller remarks on this shift:

> Abandoning his emphasis on black cultural nationalism and Pan-Africanism, Baraka proclaimed himself an adherent of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought. As in the case of his decision to depart from Greenwich Village, this transformation was neither abrupt

> nor dramatic; it was the culmination of a series of developments within his own life, shaped by his responses to both national and international debates about the future of the black liberation struggle. (20)

Initially "a subtle and innovative poet" and an equally important modernist fiction writer, Baraka entered the Black theatre scene in the 1960s with his *Dutchman* (1964) which Norman Mailer hails as "the best play in America." James Miller comments on its "social and political overtones" on "the eve of the widespread racial conflict in the United States" (16). He adds further: "An avowed Communist, Baraka who is a member of the Revolutionary Communist League and the Anti-Imperialist Cultural Union, now emphasizes a Marxist analysis of the forces shaping American society and the black community"(20). Richard Barksdale and Kenneth Kinnaman thus comment on his influence on American literature and politics:

> Both through his writings and his moral example, Amiri Baraka has exerted an incalculable influence on a whole generation of young Black writers. From beat poet to racial polemicist to cultural spokesman of Black Nationalism, his career has followed logic of development related both to internal psychological imperatives and to external changes in American society.... It is not too much to say that Baraka has established the tone and pointed the direction for most Black writing of the 1970s. (745)

Baraka's emergence as a revolutionary playwright can be traced to the influence of Maulana Ron Karenga and Malcolm X. According to Charles D. Peavy, Maulana Ron Karenga, America's chief exponent of black cultural nationalism, has consistently stressed the importance of a Cultural Revolution preceding any attempt at revolutionary social change. "The battle we are waging now," says Karenga, "is the battle for the minds of Black People... if we lose this battle, we cannot win the violent one"(Quoted by Peavy 40). The Black Arts movement in the early 1960s is such a revolutionary event. The work of Baraka has to be

understood in this context. Before effecting any significant social transformation in the condition of the Blacks, a change in their consciousness is needed. Baraka realized this and therefore used his plays as a vehicle for such a change. Seeing the widespread racism in America Baraka came to believe that every black person needs to get rid of the obstacles standing against his aspirations for freedom which include Christianity, repression of self-identity as a black man and lack of *racial unity* (my emphasis). The Blacks, in other words, must understand that Black Power through racial solidarity must be the goal of every black man to achieve the higher objective of liberation of Black people. "The total concept of Black Power," writes Peavy, "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"(40). Baraka has admitted in his interviews and lectures that African Americans must be taught the evil designs of Christianity and be led to belief in another religious faith, which is conducive to their unity. In an interview in 1968 with Austin Clarke, he said, "I think a black man has to be very brainwashed to consider himself completely free of religious tendencies.... "(36). In the same interview he said further that

> religion is... the most admirable attempt man makes to shape his life... [but] because of what we may call "priest-craft," religious ideals can often be twisted by the people who are supposedly keeping those ideals alive. A lot of times these ideals are distorted to further the worldly, non-religious ambitions of the priests. This is especially true of Christianity, where it is all "priest-craft" and no religion. (36)

He thinks that Christianity allows black people to be slaves; it has emasculated them. He wants to recover the lost power of the Blacks. According to him, their self-identity and self-knowledge lie on their choice of a religion. Baraka gives some strong reasons why he hates Christianity. The first is that it is a debased form of an "Eastern religion." Secondly, it allows

some forms of epicurianism. This tendency eventually led the white man smuggle heroin into the ghettoes as an instrument to make the Blacks imbecile. Thirdly, Christianity, says Baraka,

> allows the black man to have a certain amount of emotional liberation. You can get happy in the church. They let you scream in the church. They think all these niggers are going to be sitting up and screaming Hallelujah and what not, and then they are going to head back and start eating that pig and drinking that wine and working for the Man. (Clarke 39)

This form of emotional release is not a type of catharsis, but a way of making them bankrupt of physical energy and rage needed for social revolution. In Islam he sees an alternative to Christianity. He calls Islam a religion of the highest moral principle. The other obstacle against their aspiration for freedom is repression of self-identity. This means that they do not like to associate themselves with the notion of vestigial blackness connected with Africa. The black people must be taught to turn their back to *self-betrayal* (my emphasis) which conceals their true identity. Baraka does not mind being called a racist; the label of racism makes him feel proud of his genetic superiority over the white people. In the interview with Clarke, he says:

> I'm a racist in the sense that I believe certain qualities that are readily observable on this planet have to do with racial types and archetypes. The identities of peoples are based on their race and culture—not on Supreme Court decisions, or white people's attempts to maintain a control over the world, or the lies of the Western academies. Race and culture are the strongest determinants of human life. (32)

He accuses the black bourgeoisie of closing their eyes to what is happening in the USA and of escaping from their responsibility of changing society through art. In the following excerpt from an interview Baraka elaborates on this aspect:

> I think a lot of people—especially some of the ones talking revolution and black power and Islam—make a mistake by thinking they can divorce themselves from their brothers. And that... is almost the reverse side of what the bourgeois Negro does. The bourgeois Negro separates himself from his brother because his brother "ain't good enough." But it's not true. Because we are connected with the lowest.... We are the same people because that represents one part of our consciousness. And as long that part of our consciousness is debased, we all remain debased. (Clarke 49)

The third factor mentioned above is concerned with lack of racial solidarity on the part of the Blacks. This theme forms the central concerns of Baraka's plays written before his conversion to Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology. It is true that he was being branded as a demagogue when he used the rhetoric of the African orators in his plays, but he had no other alternative when his goal as an artist was to arouse the consciousness of his people. The challenge for him was how to fuse art and politics. He finally succeeded in effecting this fusion but was branded as a first rate propagandist and a second rate artist. But he has also received praise from many critics for such an effort. In his *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest For A "Populist Modernism"*(1978), Werner Sollors hails his attempts to combine in his plays artistic talent with political commitments. According to Sollors, "In his development as a writer, he [Baraka] offered different solutions to the problem of fusing 'populism' and 'modernism' "(2). Baraka proposed a new black theatre—"The Revolutionary Theatre"—where he could combine art and political rhetoric in order to change the black psyche, a change that would precede change in the outside world. Baraka planned an agenda for his plays to experiment his theory of theatre resulting from his political vision. Thus there is an interrelationship between what he thought and preached and what he practiced. There is strong evidence in his work of his deep commitment to his community, a commitment that no other writer of his community

had shown. In the ongoing struggle for the liberation of the black race, Baraka's revolutionary agenda was at the top of his concerns. He proposed that

> The Revolutionary Theatre should force change; it should be change.... [It] must EXPOSE! Show up the insides of these humans; look into black skulls. White men will cower before this theatre because it hates them. Because they themselves have been trained to hate. The Revolutionary Theatre must hate them for hating.... [It] must teach them their deaths... must take dreams and give them reality.... It is a political theatre, a weapon to help in the slaughter of these dim-witted fat-bellied white guys who somehow believe that the rest of the world is here for them to slobber on...this is a theatre of assault. The play that will split the heavens for us will be called THE DESTRUCTION OF AMERICA. (*Home* 210-15)

This is not just a theory of revolutionary theatre; Baraka has in fact written plays which are revolutionary in spirit. His *Four Black Revolutionary Plays* (1969) are such plays. One should not misunderstand the spirit of these plays as antithetical to that of art. On the contrary, he used the revolutionary theatre primarily as a means to recover the lost connections among African Americans. His plays included the ritual elements and the blues—features akin to black history and mythology—as well as overt violence, blasphemy and shock-tactics.

In an essay called "The Revolutionary Tradition in Black Drama" Errol Hill describes several striking features of the black revolutionary theatre of the 1960s and 1970s. They are: portrayal of the collective black participation; separatism; reversal of white and black beliefs and values; anti-authoritarianism, initial use of overt violence and its subsequent refinement; use of ritual forms and nationwide performances (424). These features too are present in Baraka's revolutionary theatre.

Baraka uses blasphemy, obscenity and overt violence as dramatic tactics to counter Christianity and self-betrayal of the black bourgeoisie and disenfranchisement among the blacks. For him violence is not physical but symbolic. Those who do not appreciate his use of violence in theatre misunderstand the nature of violence he propagates. His use of violence on the stage is to convey a message to the Black audience that through identification with modes of violence the Blacks can fulfill themselves in emotional terms. Baraka actually did not approve of actual violence advocated by the militant faction of the Black Panther Party. Floyd Gaffney in his biographical essay, "Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)," supports this view:

> During the black movement of the turbulent 1960s, the more militant faction of the Black Panther Party as being chauvinistic and bourgeois attacked Jones's cultural nationalism. His religious, metaphysical brand of nationalism was in conflict with their more utilitarian notions. (28)

Baraka himself has stated this use of symbolic violence in an interview with Judy Stone in 1964: "The reason I'm not a violent man—that's what I'm trying to say in *Dutchman*—is that art is the most beautiful resolution of energies that in another context might be violent to myself or anyone else"(10). According to him, art has the capacity to absorb raw violence into its texture and to redirect its energy toward a more constructive goal. But the whites are incapable of comprehending this "signifying" technique used by a black writer in the codes of black discourse. Here Henry Louis Gates's remarks are very pertinent. According to Gates, "In black discourse 'signifying' means modes of figuration itself... The black rhetorical tropes subsumed under signifying would include 'marking', 'loud-talking', 'specifying', 'testifying', 'calling out,'(of one's name), 'sounding', 'rapping', and 'playing the dozens' "(286). Informed by the Yoruba mythology, Baraka uses the technique of the Signifying Monkey of saying one thing in terms of another.

His exhortation to the Blacks to act and to take up arms against their oppressors inherent in his poetic message has to be understood in symbolic terms, not literally. Baraka's use of violence in theatre is a way of bringing about the solidarity among the Blacks against the injustices heaped on them by their oppressors. In this respect his theory of violence is close to Frantz Fanon's. Fanon, like Baraka, approves of this expedient use of violence. In *The Wretched of the Earth* he makes the following comments:

> For the native, life can only spring up again out of the rotting corpse of the settler... for the colonized people this violence, invests their characters with positive and creative qualities. The practice of violence binds them together as a whole, since each individual forms a violent link in the great chain a part of the great organism of violence which has surged upwards in reaction to the settler's violence in the beginning.... At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his respect. (73-74)

In the light of Fanon's thesis that violence is "creative," unifying and a "cleansing force" for the oppressed people, it would be appropriate to read Baraka's works as significant in the context of the ongoing struggle of the Blacks for national self-identity. Baraka was the first African-American writer to succeed in combining art with politics in symbolic terms. Even the highly creative writers during the Harlem Renaissance could not succeed in this direction as Baraka did. Charlie Reilly in his introduction to *Conversations with Amiri Baraka* (1994) has pointed out this aspect in Baraka's work:

> Whatever the modus operandi, the goal was consistent: liberation of his people from the outrages and the subtleties of modern racism. In this context... what has impressed some critics as a weakness in the later work of Amiri Baraka—a blurring of art and

> politics—is actually the result of a career-long conviction that the two are unseparable[sic]. ("I" xi)

With the successful production of his plays like *Baptism* (1963), *Dutchman* (1964), *The Slave* (1964), *The Toilet* (1964), *Great Goodness of Life* (1969), and *Madheart* (1969), Baraka has exerted a tremendous impact on the contemporary black theatre movement.

The transformation of LeRoi Jones into Amiri Baraka is a story of gradual development from an aesthete to a theatre-activist. In the early sixties Jones was showing symptoms of such a change through his emergent notions of collective responsibility for the upliftment of the Black race. James Miller makes the following remarks in this regard: "In literary terms Jones's attempts to exorcise his earlier beliefs is revealed in his play *The Slave*, companion piece to *Dutchman* with which it was published in 1964"(17). The period between the writing of poems collected in *Preface* and *The Dead Lecturer* (1964), his second collection of poetry is a very crucial time in Jones's career when he was struggling hard to sever himself from his Greenwich Village bohemian life. Floyd Gaffney comments thus on this painful stage of his life:

> The developing consciousness of being black appears effectively in his works only after he dissociates himself from the strong influence of the beat poets. The slow and penetrating assessment of self by which he achieved a black identification is strongly expressed in the poetry of *Preface to A Twenty-Volume Suicide Note... The Dead Lecturer* (1964), and *Black Magic* (1969). (38)

Apart from turning away from the bohemian life in the Village, Baraka began to experiment with various literary forms and themes that would suit his objectives of cultural nationalism. Before moving to Harlem, Baraka visited Cuba on an invitation from Castro on whom he had

already written a poem entitled "January 1, 1959: Fidel Castro." This Cuban visit gave a new direction to his life and writings. He wrote an essay called "Cuba Libre," which shows his inclination towards Marxism. This essay is the first of a series of political essays later collected in *Home: Social Essays* (1966), a book "which document his increasingly explicit social commitments"(Sollors 4). In another short piece called "Statement" he wrote:

> 'The Destruction of America' was the Black poet's role... [and] to contribute as much as possible to that. But now, I realize that the Black Poet ought also to try to provide a 'post-american form' even as simple vision, for his people. Perhaps by studying and understanding Pre-american or Pre-white forms we will know how to strengthen any post-american form. (*Home* 257-8)

Finally, he said, "We must, in the present, be missionaries of Blackness, of consciousness, actually.... The Black poet must give his life to communicating to Black people the precise circumstance of contemporary universal consciousness" ("Statement" 258). Again, it was around this time only that he started trying his hand at drama through which he would get an opportunity to talk to his people face to face.

During his visit to Cuba, when a radical and communist Mexican delegate asked him about his political nuetrality, he answered in this way: "I am in complete agreement with you. I'm a poet.... What can I do? I write that's all. I'm not interested in politics"(*Home* 42). But as Floyd Gaffney observes, "he was greatly disturbed by the attack and began to question the significance of third world politics in relation to his noncommittal stance"(25). With a sudden flash of insight he realized that it was possible to use writing as a weapon to transform the minds of his people and this message was to be sent to every Black person in the country. But he was very cautious in employing drama as an instrument of persuasion. He first made a moderate attempt in *The Eighth Ditch*, which was a part of his novel, *The System of Dante's*

Hell. After moving to Harlem, he started the Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School. This was a transitional period in his career. Kimberly Benston comments on this transition:

> ... Baraka's divorce from the "benevolent step/mother America"("Hymn to Lonie Poo") was liberalized by his move from the Village to Harlem, from an inter- to intraracial marriage, and (in a splendid blend of hermeneutics, symbolism, and performance) from the Western-Christian-"slave" name "LeRoi Jones" to the Pan-African-Islamic-warrior title "Imamu Amiri Baraka. ("I" 3)

The founding of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School in Harlem marked the beginning of a very significant period in the history of African-American drama and theatre. Its significance lies not only in its breaking away from the sterile Euro-American theatre conventions but in its establishment of an alternative theatre, which was suitable to the needs of the African-American community. "The theatre that Jones proposes," says Larry Neal in his seminal essay "The Black Arts Movement,"

> is inextricably linked to the Afro-American political dynamic. And such a link is perfectly consistent with Black America's contemporary demands.... The Black Arts theatre, the theatre of LeRoi Jones, is a radical alternative to the sterility of the American theatre. It is primarily a theatre of the Spirit, confronting the black man in his interaction with his brothers and with the white thing. (33)

Jones' theatre was a means through which an attempt was made to reach out to the entire Black community and to establish with it a fellowship of spirit. Another critic, Peter Bailey also defines Jones' theatre as a theatre of confrontation: "His [Jones's] plays were written as a weapon with which to confront racism on a cultural level just as other Blacks were using other means to confront it in the streets"(19). Thus, for a sensitive young dramatist like Jones, a special kind of theatre he was engaged in served as a medium of cultural expression. "Plays

such as *The Toilet, Greatness of Life, Baptism,* and *Madheart,*" adds Bailey, "told off, threatened, condemned, accused, and hurled righteous invectives at the System for past and present injustices inflicted on black people"(19).

Baraka's development as an African-American playwright has clearly stemmed from his early efforts at writing poetry as a Beat bohemian. His novel, *The System of Dante's Hell* as well as some of his plays like *The Toilet, Dutchman* and *The Slave* reflect some of the incidents of his own life which are crucial to his development as a dramatist.

Ironically, Jones's antiwhite attacks propelled him into the limelight of public attention. By late 1965 he had put an end to his marriage to Hettie Cohen and broken most of his ties with the white literary community. Although the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School was a short-lived project, it revolutionized black theater by performing contemporary dramatic works informed by Black Nationalist beliefs. It served also as an inspirational model for the black communities throughout the country. The police closed the BARTS in 1966. In the August of the same year Jones married Sylvia Robinson (Amina). In his hometown, Newark, he organized a multifunctional black cultural center called Spirit House, complete with a theater and a group of actors. He also established a publishing house called Jihad (Arabic: "Holy War") and an African free school for young people in the community who studied his own works as well as of Maulana Karenga and other thinkers. Kimberly Benston says that "Jones's exploration in drama during this period closely parallel the thematic concerns of *The Dead Lecturer,* ranging from the iconoclasm of *The Baptism* to the drama of divided impulses in *The Toilet* to the unrestrained fury of *Dutchman*" ("I" 15). The theme of the divided self is also clearly expressed in "An Agony. As Now," a poem included in *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961).

At this stage, the act of performance, an integral part of African oral tradition and black music came to assume the center of his art. Nevertheless, at this point in his career he clearly put politics in command of his art and life and continued the effort to merge art with life, literature with politics. Baraka's transition from the expressive mode of poetry to the imitative mode of theatre is explicitly exemplified in his first experiment of dramatic form, *The Eighth Ditch,* which is embryonically embedded in his semi-autobiographical novel, *The System of Dante's Hell.* His realization of the immense importance of black music in the life of African Americans provided another dimension to his drama. Almost every study of Baraka's works emphatically pinpoints this move in his career. For example, James Miller's remark on *The Eighth Ditch* is very pertinent. "An early dramatic experiment, *The Eighth Ditch,*" observes Miller, "is more an exploration of states of consciousness than a full-fledged play. Nevertheless, in its exploration of the theme of the divided self and in its use of the blues as a recurring motif, *The Eighth Ditch* anticipates the direction Jones's dramatic work would take in the future"(11). What is significant about the play is that it is a crucial link between Baraka, the poet and Baraka, the playwright.

Set in a black boy-scout camp in 1947, *The Eighth Ditch* revolves around a dramatic encounter between two characters identified as 46 and 64. The protagonist of the play, 46, is typical of Jones's early personae: passive and self-preoccupied; the antagonist, 64, an "underprivileged" black youth, is both 46's foil and an unrecognized aspect of his consciousness—46's secret self. The play establishes a sharp contrast between these two characters, with black music functioning as an index of consciousness and awareness. For example, 46 identifies with the music of Flip Phillips and Nat King Cole, while 64 is closely associated with rhythm and blues. The central scene of the play is a graphic seduction scene in which 64 seeks to merge his consciousness with 46's:

> I want you to remember me... so you can narrate the sorrow of my life. (Laughs) My inadequacies... and yr own. I want to sit inside yr head & scream obscenities in your speech. I want my life forever wrought up with yours! (*SD* 82)

Jones continues the theme of a growing adolescent black's struggle to come to terms with the world in his next plays, *The Baptism* (1964) and *The Toilet* (1964) but, he extends the growing black man's conflict with the outside world and its constricting codes including those of religion.

The Baptism, produced in 1964, deals with the chance encounter of a fifteen-year-old boy who is a homosexual with a hypocritical minister in a well-to-do arrogant Protestant church. Clearly indebted to the works of French playwright Jean Genet and the theatre of the absurd, the play excoriates Christianity for its hypocrisy, commercialism and sexual repression. Though the play lacks a clear dramatic focus and is heavily dependent upon the shock value of irreverent attitudes for its effects, it is intended to make blacks aware of the evil side of Christianity, which is considered to be the source of oppression for them. In his interview with Austin Clarke, Jones justifies his irreverent attitude: "A lot of times, the [religious] ideals are distorted to further the worldly, non-religious ambitions of the priests. This is especially true of Christianity, where it is all "priest-craft" and no religion.... They [whites] allow Christianity because Christianity doesn't exist the way they practice it; it's a debased form of an Eastern religion.... Again, the white man's religion allows these Negroes to have all the wine they want, all the pig, all the dope"(36).

What infuriated Baraka against Christianity was its commercialization, its instrumentality of oppression, its distantiation of African-American community from the ancestral practices of worship.

His next play, *The Toilet*, produced in the same year, is more specific and coherent than *The Baptism* in its delineation of the conflicts of the Black man with the world. In this play the violence of the Blacks is pitted against the social codes of the community. Set in a toilet at the end of the day in an urban high school, the play concerns a gang of black youths who assemble in anticipation of a fight between their leader, Ray Foots, and a white boy, Jimmy Karolis. Foots is supposedly seeking revenge for a love note Karolis had sent him, but, when the two characters meet it is unclear who made the first advance. In their encounter, Ray tries to avoid fighting Karolis, who has already been beaten by some of the gang members, but Karolis forces the issue. When Karolis gains the advantage over Ray, the gang jumps on Karolis and beats him into unconsciousness. After the gang leaves, Ray re-enters and cradles Karolis's head in his arms, weeping as the play ends. The sentimental conclusion of *The Toilet* reveals Jones's ambivalence in his relationship with the white world. At this point he seems to be in a dilemma as to how he would completely free himself from his relationship with his past which was defined in terms of a bond of friendship with his white friends of the Village. James Miller comments in the following passage on this ambivalence:

> On the one hand, the dialogue of the play shows his increasing commitment to the literary possibilities of Afro-American urban speech. On the other hand, Ray Foots, Jones's sensitive and culturally divided protagonist, is portrayed as victimized by the world—, as is the white boy, Karolis. To the extent that *The Toilet* embodies a social statement, it indicts the brutal society—symbolized by the gang—that will not allow love to exist. (15)

Jones clearly emphasizes in this play the impossibility of love in a society of racial hatred. But this is not as much the focus of the play as is the conflict between two contradictory impulses in the mind of Ray Foots. Although the play depicts the conflict between the black and the

white communities, critics have noted, as it is easy to do so, the continuance of the ambivalence in Baraka's mind in *The Toilet.* "The central conflict of *The Toilet,* however," Miller thinks, "rests within the divided consciousness of the protagonist. Torn between his identity as Foots the black gang leader, and Ray, the sensitive individual, the protagonist of *The Toilet* seemed to mirror the conflict within Jones himself"(15). At the same time, as Owen E. Brady states, "*The Toilet* is a realistic play which examines the interaction of the black and white cultures in America.... [It] shows the difficulty that a black individual encounters in forging a self-identity while living amidst antithetical cultural forces"(69). The use of metaphors in the play suggests the play's paradoxical message. On the one hand, the play is realistic in its portrayal of Black society; on the other, this realism is undermined by the implications of metaphors. Brady's comments on this aspect are worth quoting here:

> The setting of the play is a metaphor for the "impersonal ugliness" of mainstream American society. It is a place of moral filth where black and white community commonly mixes and sometimes explodes. It also becomes a ritual place for Ray Foots's loss of self-identity through an initiation into the filth of American society. (69)

This double aspect of the play makes it a transitional work. From this point on Jones gradually moves away from his affiliation to the white race to a closer affinity to the Blacks. Now he begins very appropriately with a correction of his self-image through his rejection of his white past.

The social and political events of the period—the Civil Rights movement, sit-in protests, bus-boycotts, court confrontations and other forms of demonstrations—transformed him into an angry playwright. The assassinations of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and the bombing of the Birmingham Sunday school in which four Black children were killed

further fueled his anger. These incidents made him realize that the only way to counter white racism was "to fight back." The first step in this direction was to establish what he called "Black Power." This "Power" was defined as a way of correcting the self-image of the African-American community and of empowering the black male by arousing his masculinity. Several other aspects of Black Power are linked with redefinition of black man-woman relationship, father-son relationship, and, the most problematic of all, black man-white woman relationship; the black family; the black church and Christianity; poverty; education and employment; the complacency of the black bourgeoisie and other evils like racism caused by years of slavery. The primary aim of Baraka at this stage was to build a Black nation through Black Power.

One of the most important aspects of Baraka's black nationalism was the exclusive focus upon the black audiences for his plays. In his early plays, he had a mixed audience in mind. But in *Dutchman,* which is the representative play of his later period, Baraka envisages complete Black audience. In its radical temper and exclusive racial focus Baraka provides a message for the Blacks that their survival in America is dependent upon a strong sense of nationalism. Gaffney's comments in this regard are extremely appropriate:

> *Dutchman* breaks down many traditional barriers of mainstream theatre, which had consistently prevented the black playwright from recreating the full truth of his experience. In fact, it achieves some of the basic goals of the black arts movement articulated during the early 1960s. *Dutchman* dramatizes the psychological, political, and spiritual revolt of an oppressed people through the actions of its protagonist, Clay, a young black man easily identifiable by his speech and manner of his dress as middle class. (26)

In *Dutchman* and *The Slave*, which John Lindberg describes as "companions in revolution," Jones gave a violent jerk to both the white world for their hypocrisy and the black world for their naiveté and credulity. Jones thought that it was this naiveté that made the Blacks victims of white racism. Besides these messages to the black and white audiences, there is a special message in these plays for the Blacks in the vein of the signifyin (g) technique, a message that appeals to the black victims to forge a communal bonding among themselves as a way of creating a bulwark against the white oppression. "The victims in the world of Jones's plays are Clay," says Larry Neal, "murdered by the white bitch-goddess in *Dutchman,* and Walker Vessels, the revolutionary in *The Slave.* Both these plays present Black men in transition" ("BAM" 34). *Dutchman* also implies that the feigned identity of the integrationist middle class is not only a self-betrayal but also a disloyalty to the whole black race. Jones also suggests that the pose of the Blacks belonging to the middle class in imitation of the whites is an acquiescence to white domination and hence detrimental to the entire black race. For Jones survival through self-determination, self-respect and self-defense is a far better choice than survival through self-betrayal. This aspect he takes up again in more pronounced ways in *Great Goodness of Life (A Coon Show).*

In *Dutchman* there are two major characters: Clay, a young Negro intellectual and Lula, a white trampish woman. Four supernumerary onlookers, who for the most part are mute, complete the cast. The scene is set in a subway car, and the action is a dialogue between Clay and Lula reaching its climax in the final scene when Lula stabs Clay to death after he had blasted her with a tirade accusing her of racism. The action of the play takes place down in "the flying underbelly of the city," in a New York subway car where Clay, a decorously dressed young Negro, is accosted by Lula, a voluptuous white slut.

> Boy, those narrow-shoulder clothes come from a tradition you ought to feel oppressed by... What right do you have to be wearing a three-buttoned and a striped tie? Your grandfather was slave, he didn't go to Harvard. (*D* 18)

This is what Lula says to Clay and persists in taunting him while seductively flinging at him the allurements of her sexuality. "You look like death eating a soda cracker," she says, and then, mocks his interest in poetry and Baudelaire: "The black Baudelaire! Yes... My Christ. My Christ!" (*D* 20). So when she fails to persuade Clay to fall into the trap of her sexuality, she continues to prod him with words like,

> You middle-class black bastard. Forget your social-working mother for a few seconds and let's knock stomachs. Clay, you liver-lipped white man. You would-be Christian. You ain't no nigger, you're just a dirty white man.... (*D* 31)

Clay explodes and spews forth in a long tirade the anger and murderous hatred towards the whites the symbols of which he carries in his heart:

> Don't you tell me anything! If I am a middle-class fake white man... let me be... I'll rip your lousy breasts off! Let me be who I feel like being. Uncle Tom.... Whoever.... (*D* 43).

When he has finished his speech and prepares to leave the train, she plunges a knife into his chest and then orders the other passengers in the car to throw away the dead body. At the next stop, another young black man enters the car and takes a seat near her, whereupon Lula begins to stare at him in the same way as she had begun with Clay. Nathan A. Scott remarks on this aspect: "[A] nd, as the curtain falls, it is clear that the drama is becoming a kind of sinister roundelay that figures forth the pattern with which black men are ever and again encountered by the American reality—of seduction and insult and then of destruction, when they dare to

offer any resistance"(333). Again, "The play is a brilliant stage-piece which, in the tension-charged climate of the early sixties detonated one of the major episodes of the period"(333). What Jones is striving to bring home is the "irrationality" of Clay in understanding the nature of the white trap set against him. Houston Baker, Jr. quotes Baraka in his *Journey Back* to substantiate this point: "If, right this minute, I were, in some strange fit of irrationality, to declare that 'I am a free man and have the right of complete self-determination,' chances are that I would be dead or in jail by nightfall"(*Home* 79; Baker 92).

Floyd Gaffney's observations in this regard are pertinent: "The sociopolitical implications of the play suggest that the survival of the American black male is predicated upon his ability to dissemble his covert thoughts and feelings. For once his true feelings are revealed, he renders himself vulnerable, and symbolically he becomes yet another black victim of integration"(27). But when examined in the context of Jones's appeal to the urgency of cultural nationalism, the play's most important message to the black people is get united or get killed.

The play draws on mythic elements such as ironic inversions of biblical imagery and archetypal white seductress recurrent in African-American literature. At various points in the play Clay is identified with Christ, Uncle Tom, and Bigger Thomas; Lula the apple eating Eve, is associated with furies and vampires. She is portrayed as a white temptress who destroys black men, a common figure in African-American literature. The title of the play implies both the cyclical and repetitive nature of myth, suggested by the legend of the *Flying Dutchman*, as well as the historical legacy of slavery—for it was a Dutch ship which first brought slaves to the New World. Andrzej Ceynowa makes the following observation about these mythic allusions and literary echoes in the play:

> No other play of the new Black Theatre—possibly of the whole American drama of the last twenty years—has been more widely discussed than Jones/Baraka's *Dutchman*.... Aside from its continuing social relevance, one possible reason for the great critical popularity of the play is that it is a happy hunting ground for literary allusions, references, and echoes. (15)

These mythic overtones and literary echoes strengthen the play's "plurality of readings,"(8) to use a phrase from Henry Louis Gates's seminal essay "Criticism in the Jungle." These 'multiplications' inherent in the play imply that Jones is not a politically conscious writer interested in propaganda, but a skillful artist concerned with various nuances of signification. Jones defines black unity in terms of "Black Power" and thinks that one could be achieved only if the other is accomplished. In an essay entitled "A Black Value System" Jones makes this point. Once these are accomplished, black men could lead the revolutionary army and transform the oppressive world into a world of his dream. He exemplifies this unity in *The Slave*, a companion piece to *Dutchman*. In this play the protagonist, Walker Vessels, is not a victim of white forces but a nationalistic hero. "Walker Vessels in *The Slave*," Larry Neal observes, "is Clay reincarnated as the revolutionary confronting problems inherited from his contact with white culture" ("BAM" 34).

Set in the future, the dramatic action of *The Slave* occurs against the background of a racial war, where blacks are clearly close to victory. Walker Vessels, the leader of the black revolutionary army returns to the home of his former white wife, Grace, presumably to reclaim his two daughters and also to stage a final confrontation with his former professor, Bradford Easley. In a long and rambling conversation, these three characters discuss their past lives and debate on literature, politics and human values. The confrontation ends when Easley attacks Walker, who has got drunk and somewhat incoherent as the play progresses. Walker kills

Easley and shortly after Grace is mortally wounded by a falling rafter. Before she dies, Walker tells her that their children are dead, but as the play ends, the sound of a screaming child is heard. The end of the play is somewhat ambiguous which leaves the audience bewildered by the screams of Vessels's daughters, giving no clues whether they were alive. The conflict in Jones's mind is externalized in the central theme of the play, which involves the agonizing struggle between Jones's attachment to his white past and the emerging black present, which Walker represents. Larry Neal comments on this conflict:

> The play is essentially about Walker's attempt to destroy his white past. For it is the past, with all of its painful memories, that is really the enemy of the revolutionary. It is impossible to move until history is either recreated or comprehended.... Walker demands a confrontation with history, a final shattering of bullshit illusions. His only salvation lies in confronting the physical and psychological forces that have made him and his people powerless. ("BAM" 34)

Jones's ambivalence towards his past and his assertion of his new role as a revolutionary playwright serve as thematic links between *The Toilet* and this play. But *The Slave* has a stronger revolutionary temper and nationalistic message. James Miller observes:

> Walker Vessels, poet and revolutionary leader is depicted as a figure of sharply divided impulses. As the leader of the black liberation struggle, he has engulfed the entire society in a racial war, yet his social and political philosophy is essentially a nihilistic one, one, which he admits, will lead only to a "change in the complexion of tyranny"... Vessels emerges as character trapped between his self-proclaimed public role and his private beliefs, locked into an adversary relationship with a white world against which he violently attempts to assert himself. (17)

This attempt for self-assertion, Jones suggests, is a way of countering the supremacy of white domination. But only when the Black man achieves Black Power through solidarity, he can stand against his white oppressors. Walker progresses from a world of conventional stereotypes to a phase where he is about to achieve some form of self-knowledge.

In his next play, *Jello*, Jones gives his protagonist a stronger character to cope with the exigencies of his situation. Larry Neal comments on this aspect:

> Jones inverses the "red-mouthed grinning field slave" the emblem of Walker's army... by making Rochester (Ratfester) of the old Jack Benny (Penny) program into a revolutionary nationalist. Rochester, ordinarily the supreme embodiment of the Uncle Tom Clown, surprises Jack Penny by turning on the other side of the nature of the Black man. He skillfully and with an evasive black humor robs Penny of all of his money. ("BAM" 35)

Ratfester, the protagonist of *Jello*, is neither a confrontationist nor an accommodationist, but a trickster figure who through his manipulative skill overcomes the obstacles that come on his way. It is very interesting to note how close the protagonist of *Jello* is to the image of the Signifying Monkey, Shine and Stagolee all rolled into one! Neal says further, "He is *blues people* smiling and shuffling while trying to figure out how to destroy the white thing. And like the blues man, he is the Signifying Monkey, Shine and Stagolee all rolled into one (his emphasis)" ("BAM" 36). For the first time in the history of African-American writing a theorist like Larry Neal has tried to employ the mythological figure of the Signifying Monkey as an archetypal metaphor to represent the Blacks. This metaphor has been developed later by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in a systematic way.

Jones had to fight against many forces, which stemmed from both the psychological complexes of the black people and from agents acting from outside and from divisive internal forces. He felt that the first step in taking arms against these forces was to raise the consciousness of the black people about their history steeped in suffering and deprivation. He felt that the black people had either slipped into amnesia or were too weak to fight. This need made him turn from poetry to drama, which is an appropriate medium for articulating the black revolutionary temper.

In order to arouse this consciousness in the minds of the blacks, Jones published *Slave Ship* in 1967. In this play he presents scenes of a more immediate confrontation with history. In a series of expressionistic tableaux this play depicts the horrors and the madness of the Middle Passage. There is no definite plot (LeRoi calls it a pageant), just a continuous rush of sound, groans, screams, and souls wailing freedom and relief from suffering. This play, according to Peter Bailey, was an exception to the Revolutionary Theatre that Jones was proposing when he produced it. Ron Milner another prominent playwright of the period described *Slave Ship* as "a whole, fantastic, dynamic, rhythmical drama of the slavery thing done in on-flowing motion that never stops. It is the best play written yet on the whole panorama of slavery"(Quoted in Bailey 19). This play has special affinities with the New Music of Sun Ra, John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, and Ornette Coleman. After the initial scenes of suffering pain, rape of black women in captivity, the action moves through the scenes of slavery, early attempts at revolt, tendencies towards uncle Tom-like reconciliation and betrayal, and the final act of liberation. Events are blurred, rising and falling in a stream of sound. Almost cinematically, the images flicker and fade against a heavy backdrop of rhythm. The language is spare, stripped to the essential. It is a play, which almost totally eliminates the need for a text. It functions on the basis of movement and energy—the dramatic equivalent of the

New Music. There is a remarkable difference between the playwright who wrote *Dutchman* and the one who wrote *Slave Ship*, although the same person wrote both around the same time. As Bailey observes,

> The difference between the man who wrote *Slave Ship* and who wrote *Dutchman* is the difference between those two names, Baraka and Jones. Baraka is talking directly to his people whereas Jones was screaming, "Acknowledge me! Hear me!" White critics have never given *Slave ship* the kind of praise heaped on *Dutchman.* (19)

This was followed by *Arm Yourself or Harm Yourself! A One Act Play*, a short, agit-prop sketch about the necessity of self-defense. Baraka's concept of self-defense does not conform to the accommodationist attitudes of persons like Court Royal, the protagonist of his *Great Goodness of Life (A Coon Show)*, or the passive consent to the continuance of racial injustices of the black bourgeoisie. His is an open message to raise arms and to "cut throats!"

After the success of *Dutchman* Jones realized that the only way to achieve Black Power was by establishing strong cultural bonds among the black people. At the same time he needed to be on guard against any misunderstandings of his message when he tried to change the psyche of his people.

In 1968 Jones assumed the names of Ameer (later Amiri), which means "prince" and Baraka which stands for "the blessed one," given him by Heshaam Jaaber, an orthodox Muslim and the man who had buried Malcolm X. He also assumed the title of Imamu, which means "spiritual leader," which he later, dropped in 1974. According to a biographer, his marriage to Sylvia Robinson in August 1966 signaled his complete commitment to the black cause and the "ultimate gesture of total acceptance of a revolutionary black consciousness would be reflected in 1968 through his name change...." (Gaffney 31). With the change of

his name he also changed his literary style and forms of representation. As Gaffney observes, "Changes in the style and form of his writing would be affected by his nationalist stance and expressed in several publications including a collection of *Four Revolutionary Plays* (1969), many poems in *Black Magic: Sabotage; Target Study; Black Art; Collected Poetry 1961-1967*(1969), [a collection of poetry charting his spiritual journey toward blackness]; and *In Our Terribleness (Some Elements and Meaning in Black Style)* (1970), [a book of essays and photographs, produced with Fundi (Billy Abernathy)]"(31).

Now, in his new incarnation, he took up the role of a spiritual leader. His revolutionary spirit is defined in terms of a theological stance. During this period he also produced *Black Music* (1967), a collection of essays and reviews on Afro-American music; *Black Fire* (1968), an anthology of contemporary black literature, which he edited with Larry Neal; *A Black Value System* (1970); and, *Jello* (1970), a satirical play assaulting the Jack Benny Show.

This transformation led Baraka to at least two clear directions: first, the propagation of revolutionary theatre and satirizing the white racists or white-oriented blacks with the production of F*our Black Revolutionary Plays* and *Jello* (1969); secondly, education of the black masses. For this new role of a cultural leader, Baraka turned to the African-American history and African mythology—African-American culture itself in fact—in order to revolutionize the minds of the black masses.

In his *Four Black Revolutionary Plays* (1969), he expresses his strong revulsion against the whites and white-oriented blacks. The first play, *Experimental Death Unit # 1*, is about the destruction of two white men while copulating with a black woman. Baraka's resentment against the black woman as the root of sexual perversity among blacks is equally strong. The

play has a message for the Blacks—to beware of both, the external world of the whites and the perversity among themselves.

In the second play, *A Black Mass* (produced in 1966), Baraka uses a myth from the Nation of Islam. According to this myth, Yacub, a Black scientist, developed the means of grafting different colors of the Original Black Nation until a White Devil was created. In the play, Yacub's experiments produce a raving White Beast who is condemned to the coldest regions of the North. The other magicians implore Yacub to stop his experiments, but he insists on claiming the primacy of scientific knowledge over spiritual knowledge. The sensibility of the White Devil is alien, informed by lust and sensuality. The beast is the embodiment of evil whose birth begins the process of historical subjugation of the spiritual world.

According to Floyd Gaffney, the main theme of A *Black Mass,* is to shock black spectators into recognizing the "sickness unto death of the white man by exposing his public and private sins"(31). Larry Neal says, "This is a deeply weighted play, a colloquy on the nature of man, and the relationship between legitimate spiritual knowledge and scientific knowledge"("BAM" 36). It is Baraka's the most important play mainly because it is informed by a mythology that is wholly the creation of Afro-American sensibility. *Black Mass,* according to Neal, imitates the decadent attitude toward art, ramified throughout the Western society. "Yacub's real crime," he writes further, "therefore, is the introduction of a meaningless evil into a harmonious universe. The evil of the Beast is pervasive, corrupting everything and everyone it touches. What was beautiful is twisted into an ugly screaming thing"(36). The play ends with destruction of the holy place of the black magicians and the playwright's sly prompting through a black Narrator who appears at the end and says, "There are beasts in our world. Let us find them and slay them" (*BM* 39). The drama ends with an off-stage voice that

chants a call for the Jihad to begin. This play, like *Slave Ship* (1967), demonstrates Baraka's extraordinary talents to fuse form and content into an effective performance piece.

An important feature of this play is its message of the urgency of shedding off whatever evil influence the whites have on black psyche—as a way of creating racial solidarity. While he seems to agree with the implied message of the myth about the bestiality of the white creature and about the Nation of Islam as an alternative to the white world, Baraka continues to stress the Black's African cultural roots as the marker for racial solidarity. In an interview with Marvin X and Faruk, Baraka says:

> I guess, Islam first influenced me through Brother Malcolm, Hajj Malik, because he was, actually the first Black man that I associated Islam with progressive social thinking.... The idea that Islam was being connected with progressive social thought and black nationalistic thinking... [that was] about '64—when I first began reading and thinking about it.... The next year I wrote *Black Mass,* based on the Nation of Islam's telling of the story of Yacub—the Nation of Islam's theology that seemed to me to be a vehicle for the expression of truth on many levels about man, spiritual man's subjugation by anti-spiritual forces. (51)

The Nation of Islam could be acceptable to him as an alternative to the Christian world because of its inherent moral principles and strong inner vitality. In the interview with Marvin X and Faruk, Baraka adds that "its [Islam's] unifying principle and its high moral principle are what the Black man needs: he needs to be unified, and he needs high moral principles, actually to withstand the degeneracy that America represents"(52). At the same time, he cautions the black people against the evil influence of the white devil, which could destroy the entire race. "As a social essay," Gaffney says, "it [*A Black Mass*] suggests that individual action, without

collective consent, jeopardizes the future of the black race, and that integration dehumanizes and demoralizes black identity" (31).

Baraka's commitment to his community is strengthened as he looks back into the black history and realizes the significance of black music as a source of strength for the community. It is around this time that he came to realize the importance of combining music with the oral tradition of performance, and the minstrelsy with modern theatrical techniques. "Jones's dramatic vision," Gaffney remarks, "becomes progressively denser, more complex, and increasingly symbolic in his later works.... Ancient forms of dance, mime, character, thought, language, and spectacle combine with modern techniques of sound, light, projection, and colour as media of expression"(32).

Great Goodness of Life (A Coon Show) is a play, which employs these combinatory techniques and styles of expression. Subtitled as *A Coon Show*, this play parodies the nineteenth-century American "black" minstrel show which was created by whites "to satirize, exaggerate, and in most cases, to ridicule black life-styles through the use of stereotypes and exaggerated myth"(Gaffney 32). As the play opens, the audience sees a log cabin; a reminder of Black man's rural, Southern past, and an allusion to Uncle tom's cabin, the home of the docile slave. The protagonist, Court Royal is accused by an eerie electronic Voice, of "shielding a wanted criminal. A murderer"(*GGL* 46). Court pleads his innocence comically referring to his Black middle-class civil service job: "I work in the Post Office.... I work in the Post Office and have done nothing wrong"(*GGL* 46). Critics have noted Baraka's accusations and relentless satire on the smug black middle class for allowing the oppression of the blacks in this play. "There is irony and comedy," according to Owen Brady, "in the accusation and Court's response"(158). Baraka through his comedy suggests that a Black person who

disregards his community and attempts to imitate white standards be ultimately trapped. As Brady remarks,

> The entrance of John Beck Court's lawyer begins an expressionistic scene exposing justice as an illusion and revealing the relationship between the Black professional class and the mainstream.... Beck ostensibly comes to help Court resolve his problem, but, a in the blues, the solution to a problem is phrased in ironic terms. Beck, a sycophant obviously wired to a mainstream power source, advises Court 'to plead guilty' despite his innocence so that "he can avoid severe punishment.' (159)

At the close of the play, Court, automated and dehumanized, shoots the young man. The rite performed, the voice is absolved. The victim's word, "Papa," however, "reveals his relationship with Court and deprives Court of an unambiguous salvation" (Brady 165). It is Black man's gullibility that Baraka seems to resent the most. Through his gullibility and proneness to white man's temptations for material comfort, the Black man creates an obstruction to racial solidarity. That's why Baraka holds him as much responsible as the white man for thwarting the attempt for communal unity.

In the final play in *Four Revolutionary Plays*, *Madheart* (produced in 1967), Baraka uses once again satire as a means of his antagonism towards the white racists and those who have been either instrumental in allowing racism to continue or been indifferent to it. In this play, which Baraka calls "a morality play," both whites and white-oriented blacks are satirized. There are five characters in the play. Black Man, Black Woman—the vital, natural characters in the play—are contrasted with two white-oriented Blacks, Mother, who wears a red wig, and Sister, who wears mod cloths and a blonde wig. The action of the play centers on the killing of the Devil Lady, a white female wearing an elaborately carved white devil mask. Baraka satirizes the value system of the white world (symbolized by the White Lady) by showing how

it has influenced Mother and Sister. These two ludicrous characters worship the Devil Lady, who has hypnotized them with her "white magic" and caused them to emulate her ways. The Mother's constant prayer shows her perversion: "Tony Bennett, help us please. Beethoven, Peter Gunn...deliver us in our sterling silver headdress"(*MH* 83). Black Man is enraged about the power the white Devil Lady holds over his mother and sister, and despite their horrified protests, he kills the Devil Lady (with a spear and arrow), then continually and (ritually) impales her with a wooden stake throughout the play. "The instruments of death doubtless have phallic indications," Peavy says, "for in *Madheart*, as in the other plays of Jones, *maleism* becomes an important motif (his emphasis)" (41). Black woman stresses the importance of Black man's assertion of his masculine identity. On the contrary, the Sister and Mother look down upon the Black male. "If I have to have a niggerman," says the daughter, "give me a faggot, any day." "I know the kind you mean," says the mother. "But...a white boy's better. Don't you forget it. Just sof' and sweet as pimple" (*MH* 77). These textual details give some indication of Baraka's attitude not only to the whites for their professed hatred for the Blacks but also to those blacks who are the cronies of the whites and who perpetuate the white myth of racial superiority.

In the context of the black cultural nationalism's re-examination of the black family the greatest significance of *Madheart* lies not only in its mockery of the evil influence of the white ideals of beauty but also of the black's compliance to white values. Baraka's disparagement of black women for their compliance to white values made some women writers like Ntozake Shange keep away from any affiliation to the Black Arts Movement in the sixties.

Another typical example of Baraka's vitriolic anti-white satire may be seen in his play *Police* (1968) in which "white policemen are portrayed as simpering faggots who react orgasmically as a black policeman commits suicide with a penis-pistol"(Peavy 40). Then, in

Home on the Range (1968) Baraka again employs such satire. A black criminal invades the home of a white family (Father, Mother, Daughter, and Son). All the four members who speak an unintelligible gibberish throughout the play are the targets of Baraka's harsh satire. Finally Peavy contends:

> The chief characteristic of Jones's drama is its total hatred of the white world, and the object of his plays is to change (or destroy) this world.... The conventional method of satire is to attack the thing that is to be improved, but Jones's method is indirect—he attacks the whites and the white-oriented blacks... in such a manner that they will be utterly repugnant to the black audience. (41-42)

"With the exception of *A Black Mass*," writes Houston Baker, "these works conform closely to the requirements for a 'Revolutionary Theatre' "(98). In the other three plays, *Experimental Death Unit #1*, *Great Goodness of Life,* and *Madheart,* "black victims are parodied, castigated, or shown in the throes of horrible deaths. Duff and Loco, the white characters of *Experimental Death Unit # 1*, are appropriately crushed by the bullets of a black liberation army—not before they have been rendered patently grotesque by their dialogue and actions, however"(Baker 98). It is the black man's gullibility that Baraka resents most. His resentment is clearly discernible in his portrayal of Clay, the middle-class intellectual protagonist of *Dutchman.* Clay gets killed because of his compliance with the white world. In *Great Goodness of Life*, once again, he mocks Court Royal, another representative of the black bourgeois. Although Baraka's treatment of the middle-class Negroes is somewhat milder than his treatment of the white characters, he considers the Black's willingness to be manipulated by the white power structure and temptation to material comforts an obstruction to black unity.

Like satire, which Baraka employs as a weapon against an oppressive world, another significant feature of his plays is their lyrical quality. But unlike satire, which has a negative

function of debunking and disparagement, lyricism has a positive quality of symbolic affiliation to a race that lives spontaneously and in close proximity of nature. According to Neal, this lyricism which "gives body" to his plays show that Baraka is "fundamentally more a poet than a playwright"(BAM 36). The lyric quality of *A Black Mass* and *Slave Ship* saves the playwright from the accusation of being propagandistic and parochial. Moreover, lyricism is also close to music, which is central to the Black's self-expression.

In *Black Mass,* which takes place in some pre-historical time, Baraka very successfully blends a number of themes and with the use of lyricism effects a lulling charm on the audience, especially on the black people. We learn that the concept of time is the creation of some alien sensibility, that of the Beast. Houston Baker, Jr. also emphasizes the lyrical element and the resultant tone of the play, which makes it one of Baraka's most artistic creations. He observes:

> The tone of the play [*Black Mass*](unlike the other plays of *Four Black Revolutionary Plays*) and language are elevated to match a sophisticated ideational framework. The conflict between Jacoub and his fellow 'magicians' is one between the restless, empirical inventor and the mystical artist who feels his oneness with all things. *A Black Mass* employs the demonology of the Nation of Islam, but in Baraka's hands the drama's story takes on the character of a lyrical, mythopoeic exchange designed to guide the energies of the new Black Arts Movement. ("Journey" 98)

Since 1965, when Jones emerged as a leading figure in the Black Arts Movement, his life and work have continued to undergo a series of metamorphoses. It is easy to point at two major influences chiefly responsible for this change: Malcolm X and Maulana Karenga. Maulana Karenga's influence is discernible in his acceptance of the Kawaida philosophy, which he absorbed as the essential principles of black cultural identity and solidarity. In this regard James Miller remarks:

> Inspired by the ideas of Maulana Ron Karenga, a Los Angeles-based theoretician of black cultural nationalism, Jones became deeply involved in local and national politics. He organized the Committee for a Unified Newark, a local political coalition that included the United Brothers, a group dedicated to increasing black participation in community government. (19)

Secondly, Jones's contact with the militant nationalist leader Malcolm X significantly accelerated his transformation. "Inspired by the message of Malcolm X," Miller writes, "Jones transformed his earlier antibourgeois posture into a militant black nationalist stance, one which insisted that the fundamental contradiction in American society was rooted in biological and ontological differences"(17). With his prophetic essay, "The Legacy of Malcolm X, and the Coming of the Black Nation," (published in *Home: Social Essays*), Baraka emerged as a spiritual heir to Malcolm X. In this phase he redefined the Black identity in terms of racial and national attributes: "Black people are a race, a culture, a nation. The legacy of Malcolm X is that we know we can move from where we are"(126). Charlie Reilly also corroborates this thesis:

> In a very real sense, "Amiri Baraka" rose from the ashes of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. The assassinations and the race riots had staggered the Afro-American community and, as history has shown, the old ways of race relations were coming to an end. It was a time of momentous change—changes in life-styles, changes in attitudes, changes in costumes, changes in history... changes in names. ("I" x)

Besides the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, other social and political events that were taking place in the United States and other parts of the world around this time also flared "Black fire" in his heart which resulted in the violent eruption of the Black Arts Movement with Black nationalism at the center.

What is remarkable about Baraka is that he does not merely "preach" but is also a staunch practitioner of what he preaches. His expression of Black Nationalism is shared by some of his contemporary playwrights like Ron Milner, Ed Bullins, Ben Caldwell, Jimmy Stewart, Joe White, Charles Patterson, Charles Fuller, Aisha Hughes, Carol Freeman, and Jimmy Garret. But what makes Baraka the most outstanding playwright of the Black Arts Movement is the tremendous amount of influence that he exercised on almost all of these writers. Commenting on this influence Houston Baker, Jr. observes, "Baraka now asserted that 'Black Art' had now been officially ushered into the world and securely housed. But he also knew it had come on the winds of a spiraling nationalism" ("Journey" 96).

During the last several years Baraka has expanded the scope of his revolutionary struggle against various kinds of oppression, racism being the basic one, outside the situation of the Blacks. The year 1974, when he abandoned his religious title "Imamu," marks another change in his career. He transcended the national limits and assumed the role of a revolutionary activist joining a group of Communist activists fighting at the international level against monopoly capitalism—one common enemy of the entire suffering humanity especially in the Third World countries of Africa and Asia. Regarding Baraka's abandonment of his title, Gaffney observes:

> With African Marxists such as Leon Damas, Nicolas Guillen, and Sekou Toure, Baraka has joined the international struggle against capitalism and imperialism as a worker among the masses. As a champion of the proletariat, it was inevitable that the mantle of priesthood be replaced by the jacket of the artist worker. (37)

About his creative work after this change, Baraka himself has said, "... in all this work there is an opposition, an open struggle, waged against the enemies of humanity. And we have tried to move from pretty bourgeois radicalism, nationalism... on through to finally grasping the science

of revolution, Marxism-Leninism-MaoTse-tung thought" (Quoted by Gaffney 37). This expression of his revolutionary ideology is, however, not a dilution of his earlier nationalistic temper. On the contrary, he finds in the fate of the oppressed people through-out the world a common bond of friendship and solidarity, which gives the specific struggle of the American Blacks an appropriate context for articulation.

Baraka's plays written and produced after his conversion to Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology include *The New Ark's a Moverin* (produced in 1974), *S-1* (produced in 1976), *The Motion of History* (produced in 1977), and two plays which have been seldom mentioned, *A Recent Killing* (produced in 1973), and *Sidnee Poet Heroical or If in Danger of Suit, The Kid Heroical* (produced in 1975).

S-1 expounds Marxist rhetoric primarily through the actions of a revolutionary proletariat. Twenty-six brief scenes, which take place in New York City and Washington, D. C., establish the shifting sociopolitical environment of this play. Approximately fifty characters are indicated in the script, and they play a variety of roles easily identifiable, yet slightly disguised, as such prominent black leaders as Justice Thurman Marsh, Black Supreme Court Justice, and Barnston Rayfield, civil rights activist. American capitalism and Communist party are the central conflicting forces in the play. The action centers on the passage of S-1 bill, which will control the civil liberties of the masses. Protest against legislative support of this bill is dealt a blow when the Supreme Court upholds the bill's legality. A campaign of repression is immediately activated, and "Red," the black communist, is arrested because of his multinational agitation and black nationalist sympathies. Resistance stiffens and the communist ranks swell as more workers join the party with the passage of the S-1 bill. Crisis after crisis occurs internationally among ideological enemies and NATO members. Baraka has finally

changed his stance to a splendid fusion of art and politics. Gaffney's observation is extremely illuminating here:

> This lengthy agitation-propaganda play closes on an optimistic note that the people will rise up and overthrow capitalism when pushed to the brink. The often-quoted slogan "the only solution is revolution" states the theme and summarizes the play's action. *S-1* is Baraka's pseudohistorical attempt to dramatize the complexity of oppressive and rebellious situations, which most reflect the realities of the American nightmare, democratic inequality, and capitalistic decadence. (38)

The Motion of History analyses conflicts between black and white workers consciously orchestrated by the common enemy of monopoly capitalism bent on exploitation. The action of the play is semihistorical in its focus upon elements of treachery and dishonesty, which have activated rebellions in America.

A Recent Killing is a lengthy discourse about the horrors of the military mind and the technology of war over which one has no control or comprehension. This full-length script about the U.S. Air Force has never been fully produced. In 1971 Woodie King, the black producer, at New York City's New Federal Theatre, showcased it. To quote Baraka on his conceptualization of this creation, "it tried to sum up my own burdensome trek to this 'intelligentsia,' and at the same time raise the main issue that should concern us, the liberation of humanity from the rule of injustice. But it was essentially pretty bourgeois radicalism, even rebellion, but not clear and firm enough as to revolution" (Quoted by Gaffney 38). Baraka was not happy with this play for its strong socialist propaganda.

The other little-discussed play, *Sidnee Poet Heroical,* is topical, contemporary, and potentially libelous. Because of the possibility of being sued by a noted black celebrity, no

publisher would touch it for a number of years. Again, Baraka is the best source to quote on its sociopolitical meaning: "... the essence of it points to the death imperialism plans for everyone, even petit bourgeois celebrities living in Hollywood or the Bahamas (finally! Or again, only higher up on the Hawg), far away from Watts or Harlem or Newark"(Quoted by Gaffney 38). Baraka interprets the revolutionary tenor of these plays as "socialism."

In 1976 Baraka collaborated with a group of artists to form an organization around the rallying cry of "artists unite to serve the people!" It was from these beginnings that the Anti-Imperialist Cultural Union (AICU) was formed. Baraka and his followers envisioned creating a mass organization reflecting a body of multicultural and multiracial people. This was attempted through the creation of the Yenan Theatre Workshop (YTW) which functioned as the creative arm of the AICU. The name of the group was derived from Mao Tse-tung's ideological treatise *Yenan Forum on Art and Literature.* The group originated from such an ideology wrote and performed agitation-propaganda scripts like *Images of Struggle and Revolution, What Was the Relationship of the Lone Ranger to the Means of Production* (produced in 1979), and also dramatized twentieth-century revolutionary poetry.

At this phase of his career, Baraka's dramatic art reflected his revolutionary spirit influenced by Maoist-Leninist ideology, which is an extension of his cultural nationalism articulated through a vision of political action. Gaffney observes in this respect:

> Baraka's poetry and drama, created over the past several years reflect a diminished lyricism, that highly personal statement so familiar in the earlier works. He tends to focus attention and energy on the critical realities of politics, rather than on the illusions of literature. Since he supports Marxist party-line rhetoric, it is no surprise that he regards Christian and Muslim religions as systems of superstition. The lyric and

> dramatic strength present in his earlier works seems to be dissipated in his post-nationalist period. (39)

The propaganda of Marxism-Leninism permeates all his current writing. His last collection of poems, *Poetry for the Advanced*, was written between 1976 and 1978 and published in *Selected Poetry of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones* (1979). According to Gaffney, the Marxist theme, which permeates his poetry, is echoed through the introductory words of Lenin describing the worker-artist as a model of the "working-class" intelligentsia (39). "Baraka, as worker-artist," he writes further, "has shaped the poetry with an expressive style that is strong, yet void of political self-consciousness. Happily, he has achieved success in finding a common denominator between Marxist ideology, his intellectual acuity, and his emotional consciousness"(Gaffney 39).

A re-examination of Baraka's dramatic works reveals that his mind is constantly engaged in rumination over the exploitation of one section of humanity by another and finding out solutions to put an end to it. These solutions, he thinks, could be found in the fusion of art and politics. Two conclusions could be arrived at here: it is necessary to combine art and politics in order to fight human oppression; and, with the help of this combination, it is possible to build a separate black nation on a cultural basis. Although Baraka has abandoned nationalist ideology to embrace communism, his continued allegiance to black culture is evident in his output of creative work. His latest play, *Boy & Tarzan Appear in a Clearing*, premiered in October 1981. The character of Tarzan is an over-the-hill, middle class man, running around wearing a loincloth. Boy, known to the servile black middle class as Mr. Boy, is a jive-talking hipster of the jungle. Tarzan is symbolic of decadent white rule, and Boy attempts to bring him into the 1980s to learn "Woogie language" so that Tarzan can play the native game in order to maintain power. The third primary character is Stan Stoop, a suave black man who

survives as a hypocrite by fawning, fetching, and towing. He comically keeps an eye on the Prime Minister's position and his Mercedes. The play, reminiscent of the earlier stance of a black cultural nationalist, suggests that Baraka still possesses the same satiric power, lyrical tone of language and capacity to appeal to his audiences.

Finally, Baraka's plays—essentially revolutionary even when he moved away from cultural nationalism—form an integral part of the revolutionary tradition existing in African-American literature and demonstrate that the relationship of the African-American people with the past is further linked with their African origins which cannot be and should not be severed. "One relationship that exists between the theatre of Baraka and history," observes Floyd Gaffney, "is that through each of his works he attempts to draw a defined body of experiences not isolated to the past but meaningful to the present" (40). The New Black Theatre represented by Baraka in the 1960s not only gave expression to the temper of the period but also exerted a tremendous influence on his contemporary playwrights as well as those to come. The racial tenor of the American society during these turbulent times does not suggest that the black and white masses will *ever* unite to accomplish anything, but as a political activist, social critic, and aesthetic philosopher, Baraka has tried his best to raise the consciousness of the Blacks about their self-respect, thereby creating a space for creative intervention in the age-old conflict between the two races marked by mutual acrimony and suspicion. His cultural nationalism is a force to reckon with in the context of the ongoing struggle of the Blacks for self-expression and freedom and dignity. Baraka's revolutionary struggle to give the Blacks a rightful place in America has to be understood in the context of the multi-cultural nature of American society reflecting the complementarity of various ethnic groups constituting the American "salad bowl," to use a metaphor that has replaced the older metaphor of "the melting pot."

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