

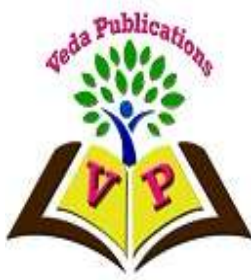


BLACK ARTS: THE EMERGENCE BLACK AESTHETICS AND THE NEW IDIOMS OF ARTICULATING THE DISSIDENT BLACK SELF

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ABSTRACT



This paper discusses the politics of Black Aesthetics trying to achieve a new form expression of the black voice vi-a-vis the progress of the Black Panther and Black Arts movement of the 1960s America. The anthology *Black Fire* is thoroughly analysed as a source of the black aesthetics and the journey of the literary as well as social movement of the Black Panther Party is mapped. Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal's contributions to the development of the aesthetics are analysed as well. Lastly, the paper also studies how the black woman's voice as well as other diverse voices within America question the monolithic, conclusiveness of the rhetoric of the black aesthetics.

Keywords: Black Aesthetics, Black Fire, Black Panther Movement, Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka, Combahee River Collective, Black Criticism, Black Arts.

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Black Arts Movement and its concomitant black aesthetic were product of debates and struggles of the 1960s regarding Black Nationalism. The Black arts movement was represented by Amiri Baraka's founding of Harlem Black Arts Repetory Theatre in 1965 and was based upon an adherence to a strict politics of black aesthetic. Black aesthetic was a term that was first articulated by Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) in the book "The Myth of Negro Literature"(1962). The concept of Black aesthetic was not what initially was pointed out i.e, integration of Black art into mainstream America. Black Aestheticians wanted to promote their unique, vibrant culture and as formulated by Larry Neal, "black aesthetic proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique and iconology."(Neal,29)Black Nationalism was concerned with the control Blacks ought to have over their political, social and economic and cultural lives. It was not simply a question of ideological posturing but the well being of the Blacks. The debate centred around destroying those social images, aesthetic values that have humiliated Black people thus it was, "about the business of destroying those imagesand myths that have crippled and degraded Black people, and the institution of new images and myths that will liberate them."(Fuller, *The Black Aesthetic*, p.346)According to critics such as Addison Gayle, Maulana Ron Karenga, Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, in the book *The Columbia Guide to Contemporary African American fiction*,

The responsibility of the Black artist was to use the word , to use language as a tool invested with the power to transform ideas generated by black people, into action...revolutionary action. (Darryl Action Carr,51)

Karenga in his 1968 essay, "Black Art : Mute Matter Given Force and Function," wrote that art should not bog itself down in the mindlessness and madness of the Western world and he suggests that in order avoid this madness," black artists ...must accept that what is needed is an aesthetic." (Karenga, *New Black Voices, An Anthology*, p.477-78) Black Art was supposed to support the rebellion, it was to be 'collective', expose the real enemy of the Blacks and attempt to bring about the revolution and change at

mass level. Amiri Baraka, considers the Black Artist's role "to aid in destruction of America as he knows it..."Baraka argues that the real Black artist is to guide the reader to the "means of destroying it."Stokely Carmichael and Hamilton claim in the book *Black Power* that although a white critic be considerate he/she does not see beyond racial oppression the same way as a "negro"¹ does. Therefore, they wrote no matter how liberal a white person he cannot escape the overpowering influence – on himself and on black people –of his whiteness in a racist society." (36)

Black Aesthetic, resultant of Black Arts and Black Power, was not devoid of limitations. The conclusion of Black Aesthetic, is that only Black artists are capable of creating and judging literature that represents black communities and therefore it is not "universal aesthetic." Black art inspired by Black aesthetics is also according to Karenga, an urban aesthetics, which emphasizes on stifling urban environment and psyche. However, Black art and the limited and narrow nationalism that it propagated despite of its blazing rhetoric and strong claims lost large quarter of adherents with the development of black women's rhetoric and other forms of diverse voices.

Now I shall proceed to analyse in this essay the works of black writers anthologised in *Black Fire: The Politics of Liberation* (1967), so as to understand what really constituted this unique black aesthetic, what were its expressions, idioms at work and lastly what were the reasons that led to its rise and fall pf a radical movement as that of the Black Art's Movement. The Black artists of 1950s had claimed that America would one day fulfil its promises of freedom and equality to its black community however the much impatient black artists of 1960s and early 1970s opposed such claims and announced the grand arrival of "nation time" and thereby inaugurated black cultural nationalist agenda. In Amiri Baraka's book *A Nation within a Nation*(1999) he argues that "Black was a country" and that "blackness" itself constituted grounds for nationhood. This new nation was to be founded upon cultural and political values of antithetical to

¹ The word Negro, has been used in this essay as retaining the signification used by Stokely Carmichael in the *Black Power*



white America and was known as “black cultural nationalism.” Black arts was however co-opted into the mainstream and it’s specific, racial aesthetic soon fizzed out. However Edward Smethhurst,² through his impressive research dispelled the accepted notion that black arts movement was anti-intellectual, monolithic and misogynistic. In support of the black artists he claimed that they were knee deep in theory which was often very sophisticated and dispelled the general critical opinion that their work was all protest and no substance. Coming to the grumble that the movement was male-centred, he notes that “black women were not only key players but sometimes stunning innovators (for example. Barbara Ann Terr, Sonia Sanchez, and Toni Cade Bambara). Smethhurst, also claimed that the movement was also pluralistic, in terms of its setting. Each city took off in a different direction depending on its past and present. According to Smethhurst, New York was non-institutional, and even anti-academic, owing its nature of being the “race capital” since the days of the Harlem Renaissance. Chicago got its direction from the radical past in 1930s, and the presence of the blues. The south’s impetus came largely from amongst the black colleges and civil rights movement. The West coast got its direction from the riots of Watt’s, the jazz ventures had set off the momentum. Through his path-breaking research Smethhurst challenged the general lens through which black arts had been perceived.

The ideology behind the black asking for their own rights was due to various racially prejudiced actions being meted out to them. America has always been “uneasy” towards its black community. The Civil Rights Movement was a great hope for all of black men and liberal whites. In 1960 and 1961 the black thought that if the Americans knew the suffering that they were to endure then it would be set right, and aspired for a goal of assimilation. Julius Lester, in this context compared Martin Luther King Jr., to a ‘knight’ who was going to prove to his father that he was indeed worthy of

being assimilated into the family.³ Soon the black people of America realized that this was false and no amount of “bowing or scraping” like their black ancestors would get them what they wanted. Their fight was to be suppressed by brutalising their body, and Lester questioned this and asked as to why was it possible for the white man to still brutalise the black for asserting his rights. The condition of the civil rights worker he pointed out was very poor as lived under constant threat of life for asserting their rights. Consequently, Lester wrote:

“How naive they were, how idealistic they were then . They had honestly believed that once White people knew what segregation did , it would be abolished . But why should they not believe it? They had been fed the American dream too. They believed Coca-Cola and the American government...they were in the Pepsi generation, believing that the F.B.I. was god’s personal emissary.”(Lester, p.441)

Soon the white tolerance towards the Black struggle fell off and organizations like CORE and SPONGE soon developed across North and South to prevent the Black struggle. The Mississippi summer project was the apex of White participation in the black man’s struggle and also the end of it. Within SNCC, itself there was widespread disagreement as whether the struggle was to be waged with White participation or without it,

Whites no matter what could not relate to the Negro community. A Negro would follow a White person to the courthouse., not because he had been convinced he should register to vote, but simply because he had been trained to say yes to whatever a white person wanted.. Others felt, however that if they were to ever expose Mississippi’s racism to America , it would only be by using the Whites....Put a thousand white kids in Mississippi and the press would watch everything and print it...Maybe one of them white boys would get himself killed and get publicity...(Lester,p. 443)

Soon the walls of segregation and hate grew much thicker with the coming to fore of leader such

² Edward Smethhurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in 1960s and 1970s*. Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press.p.471.

³ From Julius Lester’s book , “ The Angry Children of Malcolm X,” Sing Out!, xvi The Making of African American Identity: Vol. III, 1917-1968. 1-3



as of Malcolm X in 1965, Malcolm X, said aloud those things which Negroes had wanted been saying amongst themselves..he had even said those things which Negroes had been afraid to say to each other...He was not concerned with stirring the moral conscience of America, because he knew- America had no moral conscience. He spoke directly and eloquently to black men, analysing their situation, their predicament, events that had happened, explaining what it all meant for a black man in America.”(Lester, p.445)

The requirement of the black man to unearth his own African identity and know his African roots became an imminent way to counter the absorption of the black man’s identity into the manifold American identity.The Black power movement soon came to put a premium on the race, and ethnic identity to mark him as different from any other American minorities or the whites. John Henrik Clarke, in his essay, “Reclaiming the Lost African Heritage,” wrote,

..Heritage begins with the question what Africa is to me? Our writers must expand this question in order to give a more pertinent answer to the question , What Africa is to me? ...a race is like a man. Until it uses its own talents, takes pride in its own history, and loves its own memories, it can never fulfil itself completely.” (71-88)

There followed a severe rejection of all leaders who were like Uncle Toms, who had clearly removed from their lives all traces of blackness,

Now the Negro is beginning to study his past, to learn those things that have been lost that have been lost, to recreate what the white man destroyed in him and destroy that which the white man put in his head. He has stopped being a Negro and has become a black man in recognition of his new identity, his real identity. Negro is an American invention which cut him off from those of the same color in Africa.”(Lester, p.436)

The desperate desire for the blacks to be assimilated into being Americans was now lost and now they had attempted unearthing their own identity. The Afro-Americans blackness posits a sense of self within him and the Black Arts Movement helps in establishing this new self as well bears the

declaration of the proud , black self which articulates its desires and dreams, through music , such as the jazz music , poems, dramas and prose work. Thus, hand in hand with the black revolutionary nationalism grew black cultural nationalism.

The aims of the Black Panther Party, in Huey Newton’s own words there were the following evils . He wrote , “ We have two evils to fight, racism and capitalism.” The party was drawn on Marxist lines and was to,

...represent the interests of the black have-nots, which represents about 98 percent of blacks in America. We were not controlled by white country radicals nor were we controlled by the black bourgeoisie. We have a mind of our own and if the black bourgeoisie cannot align itself with our complete program, then the black bourgeoisie sets itself up as our enemy.”⁴

Newton described black power as people’s power and to put it in Elridge Cleaver’s words, it is also to project to the white world that despite slavery the black man has *Soul on Ice* , i.e. has retained his mind. The word ‘soul’ here Cleaver here points to intellectual activism of the late 1960s. Larry Neal , in his 1968 essay “The black Arts Movement,” writes, “ Black Art is an aesthetic and spiritual sister of Black Power concept ...The Black Arts and 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; and the other with art of politics.”⁵ In the *Black Aesthetic*, Addison Gayle Jr. Defines it as, “The Black Aesthetic ...is a corrective – a means of helping black people out of the polluted system of mainstream Americanism.” Malcolm X’s assassination marks the on February 21, 1965, marked the official beginning of the Black Arts Movement. Within weeks of Malcolm’s murder , writer LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) , in response fled the Village and relocated to Harlem to start the Black Arts Repertory School (BARTS), an alternative community space, school and performance space based on principles of black power such as self-

⁴ Extract from the Black Revolutionary Nationalism, “Huey Newton Speaks from Jail : An Interview.”

⁵From Philip Brian Harper’s essay.



determination, self-respect, and self-defence. However, BARTS soon spawned some eight hundred black theatres and cultural centres though short lived.

This brings us to the next significant concern of my paper. I shall begin to now on discuss black poetry, black fiction, drama and prose. Stephen Henderson, defines black poetry as , “ ..an impulse of the 1960s which is informed and unified by new consciousness of blackness...a consciousness that has shifted from Civil Rights to Black Power to Black Nationalism to Revolutionary Pan-Africanism.”⁶ Black poetry was the essence of the Black Arts Movement. Amiri Baraka (born Everett LeRoi Jones) is a leading African American poet who has also written essays, short stories, a novel, a major study of American jazz, plays, a musical drama, and an autobiography. In making popular culture the focus of his poetry, Baraka reflects the poetic shift from mythological and literary icons (which he considers bourgeois, academic, and dead) to the vitality of the everyday. Baraka and his circle looked to Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire, and the Surrealist painters to help them create a new American poetic tradition. The personal “I,” so important to the whole body of Baraka’s poetic works, also began to develop during this period, which is characterized by direct and even confessional poems such as “Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note.” In that poem, Baraka writes, “Lately, I’ve become accustomed to the way/ The ground opens up and envelopes me/ Each time I go out to walk the dog.” This personal voice expresses the confusion the poet feels living in both the black and white worlds. “Hymn for Lanie Poo” juxtaposes images from 1950’s New York with images from Africa and laments the capitulation of the poet’s schoolteacher sister to white values. She is, he says at the end of the poem, happy to make popular culture the focus of his poetry, Baraka reflects the poetic shift from mythological and literary icons (which he considers bourgeois, academic, and dead) to the vitality of the everyday. Baraka wrote: “my poetry is whatever I think I am. . . . I CAN BE

ANYTHING I CAN. I make a poetry with what I feel is useful & can be saved out of all the garbage of our lives.” He came to believe not only that any observation, experience, or object is appropriate for poetry but also that “There must not be any preconceived notion or design for what the poem ought to be. . . . I’m not interested in writing sonnets, sestinas or anything . . . only poems.” In 1974, however, Baraka became convinced that these “cultural nationalist positions” were too narrow in their concerns and that class, not race, determines the social, political, and economic realities of people’s lives. For this reason, he shifted his focus in writing and politics to Marxist-Leninist thought. In the poem Black Art, he clearly points out the purpose of Black Poems, he writes. “ Poems are bull shit unless they are /teeth or trees or lemon piled on step/ Or black ladies dying/ of men leaving nickel hearts beating them down We want a black poem/ and a Black world/ let the world be a Black Poem/ and let All Black People Speak This Poem/ Silently or Loud.” He believed that the fact that the negro could never become White and this was one of his strengths, “ neither inside nor outside, the African –American encounters his self on a boundary which is however never a point or position of identity but an inbetween, which can only be conceptualised as a movement between two cultural limits ...Moreover, this “in-between” only comes to life aesthetically rather than as a representation...”⁷ This identity that Baraka talks about is an impossible space that he tries to create between marginality and ethnicity and to articulate it he uses the old idiom of the margin and the centre., a binary logic. William J Harris, in his book *The Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic*, advances a provocative argument saying that Baraka liberated himself from the influence of the white avant-garde by creating a method of writing that both destroyed as well as that transformed the aesthetic basis of the tradition , into a proper black idiom. In improvised poems such as the , *In the Tradition and Wise* and other poems he inverts and parodies existing tropes, symbols, and transforms them into a new aesthetic construction which he calls the “Jazz Aesthetic”. He attempted to liberate words from their conventional significations, which is

⁶From Stephen Henderson, *Understanding New Black Poetry: Black speech and Black Music as Poetic References*, New York, 1973. P.183.

⁷From African American Review, p.408.



according Harris, "an western penchant." But unlike the work of the western writers, his work was not marked with mere abstraction. His was more jazz like, full of life and not lifeless. Thus, Baraka in his own way redefined, American poetry. Black aesthetic, was never to become a fixed signifier always in the process of "becoming" in the as opposed to western art which remained fixed. . thus , this new "syntax of desire," came from music particularly jazz. Jazz characterised by change, , fluidity and non-fixity. James Stewart in his essay, "The Development of the Black Revolutionary Artist," advocates change as the essence of Black art. "...As being the world is change ...The West denies change, defies change ...resists change...But all established things are temporary, and the nature of Being is, like music, changing."The ability of music to encompass within its fold many, to create symphony in togetherness he celebrates as the essence of Black Art. This spirit of togetherness Baraka initiates into the written medium through his poetry.

The dominant type in Baraka's early plays, the passive scapegoats unaware of their participation in ritual actions, condemn themselves and their communities to blind repetition of destructive patterns. Their apparent mastery of the forms of European American cultural literacy simply obscures the fact of their ignorance of the underlying reality of oppression. Inverting the traditional moral symbolism of European American culture, Baraka creates rituals that substitute symbolically white scapegoats for the symbolically black victims of his earlier works. These rituals frequently reject the image of salvation through self-sacrifice (seen as a technique for the pacification of the black masses), insisting instead that only an active struggle can break the cycle of oppression. The rituals of Baraka's Black Nationalist plays frequently culminate in violence directed against whites, or symbolically white members of the black bourgeois, or aspects of the individual black psyche, numerous critics have attacked him for perpetuating the violence and racism he ostensibly criticizes. These critics frequently condemn him for oversimplifying reality, citing his movement from psychologically complex ironic forms to much more explicit allegorical modes in his later drama; the most insistent simply dismiss his post-Dutchman plays as

strident propaganda, lacking all aesthetic and moral merit. In adopting a style of performance in accord with this cultural perception, Baraka assumed a rather didactic voice in the *Madheart* and also employed different constellations of these figures to criticize the failure of the black community to purge its consciousness of European American values. *Madheart* borrows the image of the "white devil" from the theology of the Nation of Islam (sometimes referred to inaccurately as the "Black Muslims") to account for the fallen condition of black awareness. Beginning with a confrontation between allegorical characters identified as Black Man and Devil Lady, *Madheart* focuses on the Devil Lady's influence over the Black Man's Mother and Sister, whose red and blonde wigs indicate the extent of their corruption. Aided by the supportive Black Woman, Black Man rejects and sacrifices the Devil Lady, symbolically repudiating white culture. Mother and Sister, however, refuse to participate in the ritual of purification. Sister loses consciousness, believing that the death of the Devil Lady is also her own death. Lamenting over her daughter, Mother calls on white "saints" such as, "Tony Bennett, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Batman" for deliverance. Clinging to their belief in whiteness, Mother and a revived Sister descend to the level of slobbering animals. Motivated by love rather than hatred, Black Man turns a fire hose on them as the play ends. His concluding speech echoes Baraka's basic attitude toward his suffering community: "This stuff can't go on. They'll die or help us, be black or white and dead. I'll save them or kill them." To avoid being sacrificed, Baraka implies, the African American community must repudiate its internal whiteness. The elimination of the white "devil," far from being an end in itself, is simply a preliminary step toward the purification of the black self-image argues Lori Hall Burghardt in her essay.

Ronald Drayton in the drama *Nocturne on the Rhine* uses moralistic, typical characters such as the Priest and the Thief and the drama clearly captures the rejection of the Christian religion by the thief . In the *Notes From A Savage God*, there is a n attempt by the black boy who in his hopeless loneliness wants to erase himself. There is an almost nihilistic overtone in this play as there is in the poetic corpus of Amiri Baraka,



..that's all I have to do to complete it ... the crime has been done...another note to the list of my accomplice to my suicide...and the murderer to anyone who touches me...murder in my throat ...death on my breadth..blood on my shoes ...my identity is shaped by the very fragments of my disorder.”(Notes From A Savage God, p.509)

Julia Fields, in her short story, *Not Your singing Dancing Spade*, brings out the predicament of the black artist, his internal conflicts, moments of weakness and need for encouragement that stabilizes the protagonist in his sense of helplessness and drooping self-esteem. This story is different in its flavour because it has a very positive and healing overtone, “Life began to flow again. His blood sang vital and red. Freedom. Power, even .Yes, I am beautiful. Born black. Born with no lack. Decorated .Born decorated.” There is a sense of hope, merriment, reconciliation which the rest of the male writers seem to lack in. Julia Fields, through her essay articulates the same principles of Black aesthetics but adds a different essence that is missing in literary pieces of the other male writers.

Lisa Gail Collins, in the essay “Activists Who Yearn for Art That Transforms : Parallels in the Black Arts and Feminist Arts Movements in the United States” argues that both the women’s movement as well as the black power movement had one similarity that they were marked with utopic vision. But the greatest criticism of the Black arts movement was that it was male centered. Madhu Dubey, in *Black Women Novelists and the National Aesthetics*, argues, “ that the nationalist writers like Stephen Henderson, Addison Gayle, and Elridge Cleaver, amongst others, demonstrated the western equation of Blackness with ugliness, evil, corruption, and death.” (p.28) The woman is absent, thus “ at a first glance the, black women novelists of the 1970s appear to reject wholesale the Black Aesthetic conception of an essential, self-represent subject.” They reject the scriptural authority that Black Aesthetics takes up in its notion of identity. The struggle of the black woman was much similar to the struggles of the black man for both had to fight a western counterpart. The black woman’s liberation struggle had however double fronts; it had to fight

both race and patriarchy. It was remarkably different from the white woman’s struggle against patriarchy and was also against the black man. The Combahee River Collective⁸, acknowledged the debt of the Black Nationalists and Woman’s (White) Liberation Movement yet it also stressed its differences from both, “ it was our experience of disillusionment within these liberation movements...that led to the need to develop a politics that was anti-racist, anti-sexist, unlike those of Black and white men.”(Dubey,p.17) Thus, it was in this context that the phrase “all women are white and all Blacks are male was” coined. Dubey, also points out that the Moynihan Report which blamed the black woman and her Amazonian personality as the reason behind disruption of black families made Black mate writes like Cleaver co-opt with the governments production of discourse, “ Appropriating Moynihan’s matriarchy thesis, these black nationalists seemed unaware that the government’s production of a discourse that highlighted Black man’s lack of masculine privilege in the family served to displace and disguise their economic oppression in the labor market.” Following this myth of the matriarch the black nationalist organizations came down very strongly on women. Amiri Baraka wrote, “Nature has made woman submissive, she must submit to man’s creation in order to exist.” Larry Neal wrote, “woman as primarily need / man as doer.” The collective aspect of black aesthetics is also mostly visible in the black women’s fiction. Most of the novels published during this time employ the oral folk quality to emit the unique black voice. Community figures in *Bluest Eye*, *Meridian* etc. The black women writers could actually suggest a continuity between the past and the present whereas the present which can sustain the future whereas the male writers such as wants to evade the past for it is of suffering. However, according to Sun Ra’s personal ideology, he “presents the artist and his music within the context of the African-to-African American cultural continuum. .Ra’s greatest undertakings were his attempt to revise black history from an insider standpoint. Ra’s “mythic past,” referred to as, “Astro Black Mythology”, is rooted in his study of ancient Egyptian history and is revealed through his name, record label, costumes, album designs, song titles,

⁸A feminist group established in 1974.



and other representations. Lock suggests that Ra aimed to re-familiarize blacks with their African past, an agenda that was often unpopular in the 1940s and 1950s. Cleaver in *Soul on Ice*, says that embracing the black woman makes him feel he is embracing slavery. Whereas Sonia Sanchez, in 'to all sisters' writes, "there ain't /no MAN/ like a black man..."

Like any movement that espouses nationalism as dogma, Black arts movement also had to face its limitations. The movement that had started out being revolutionary soon became reactionary and misogynistic. It lost its pluralistic quality and one monologic voice was replaced with another. It brought about its own demise and Amiri Baraka, himself was aware of the self-consuming nature of this nationalistic phase. He wrote, "all of u wanted to use our art as weapon of liberation but in the main we fell into the error of cultural nationalism and many of us are yet to recover." However, because of his ability to redefine himself Baraka could also redefine the usefulness of the movement. The Black Arts Movement, served as a tool of transition and thundered the pivots of the white American society out of their complacency and compelled through provocative arts as well as fear of militancy and compelled them to acknowledge, register and know the new voices trying to promote a unique aesthetics of art.

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