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The Politics of In-betweenness in Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman*

Abstract

African American identity is essentially a hybrid construct. An African American is neither an African nor an American. He is a hybrid of both identities: an in-between figure. Third space, according to Homi Bhabha is an in-between, hybrid space where the first (personal) and the second (representational) spaces work together to get a new space. This space creates both positive and negative consequences. The existential dilemma of such individuals is posited in contemporary literature. American literature of 20th century witnessed fiction and nonfiction regarding the lives and struggles of African American in America. *Dutchman* by Amiri Baraka is rightfully considered the opening salvo of the Black Arts Movement that championed the cause of African American in America. The play alludes to the transitional phase in the life and career of Amiri Baraka as a political activist and a socially committed playwright. This paper attempts to locate the production and consumption of third spaces within the socio cultural milieu of America as reflected through *Dutchman*.

Keywords: hybridity, in-betweenness, mimicry, third space, liminal self, African- American, double consciousness, assimilation, annihilation

In his influential book, *Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois says, “One ever feels his twoness, - a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (3).

From slavery on, white supremacists have recognized that control over images is essential to the maintenance of any system of racial domination. Nearly after 100 years of Emancipation Proclamation, African Americans in America still inhabited a starkly unequal world of disenchantment, segregation and oppression, including race-inspired violence. The politics of racial assimilation has brought in devastating effects to the African Americans. The integration promises reinforced white superiority myths and deprived Blacks of their pride and sense of unified self. Blacks could gain entry into the mainstream only after adapting to the white standards of life, affirming to the white norms regarding blackness. It is a power-knowledge sort of game, where the power resolutely excludes the ‘Other’ from its discourse. What happens in this struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed is that the latter adapts to the standards posed by the former as a model to be followed. In this process he/she unconsciously falls into the interstices between native culture and adopted culture. The divided self perception of the Black subject who has lost his native cultural origin while embracing the culture of the mother country also creates within him an inferiority complex which in turn leads him to imitate and appropriate the culture of the colonizer. Bhabha calls this tendency as mimicry. He believes that mimicry creates a hybrid third space in which a new identity might emerge from the interaction of two cultures. This existential dilemma among African Americans in America is reflected in the contemporary American literature.

Black theater and literature are directed towards creating black consciousness among Blacks in America. Amiri Baraka (formerly known as LeRoi Jones) is one of the major figures in Black theater. His works are considered as the finest products of the creative energies of 1960s. Baraka’s award winning play *Dutchman* receives attention as a play that coincides with an important landmark in the life and career of Amiri Baraka. Before his production of *Dutchman*, Baraka belonged to the Beat generation of America. Later on he moved onto seek authentic forms of black expression. A great alteration of his ideas and beliefs happened during this period. He changed his name into Ameer Baraka and later to Amiri Baraka.

Dutchman, produced in 1964, features a fatal subway ride of a young Negro boy and a White lady. The title of the play recalls the myth of legendary *Flying Dutchman*- a ship

doomed to sail in the oceans forever. Here White America has doomed itself through the non-recognition of Blacks as humans. African American in America, like the character of the play, Clay is left astray to sail between their multiple identities and interrogations related to it. He should either assert his blackness or assimilate with his white upbringing. In his play Baraka presents two characters belonging to two different race and gender riding the same subway train. Baraka revolutionizes the theatrical space by setting his play in a subway train. The spatio-temporal circumstances in the subway reflect the identity of each character. The characters carry two different worlds. The subway creates a space of obscurity where the commuters take temporary identities in the quite limited duration of the journey. This train is Lula's dominant space because she "knows" Clay's type very well. She controls the conversation with her knowledge. In the darkness of the subway Lula exposes the antithetical worlds inside Clay – an assimilationist American and an African.

Like his name suggests, Clay is a person who can easily be geared by anyone. Clay is the black American who allows him to be shaped into the image of the white middle class. Here Lula determines Clay's roles. In their conversation, Lula predicts Clay's hometown, character of his friend Warren Enright and his possible incestuous relationship with his sister. The conversation goes well until Lula starts to question Clay's outfits and manners.

Malcolm X states that even whites do not like the concept of integration. He says it "confused and angered them. It was supported only by the Black bourgeoisie the brain washed, white-minded minority who are ashamed of being black and don't want to be identified with the black masses and seeking to lose identity by mixing, inter-marrying and integrating with the white man."

Lula questions his right to wear a suit and a tie.

LULA. What have you got that jacket and tie on in all this heat for?
And why are you wearing a jacket and tie? . . . boy, those narrow shoulder clothes come from a tradition you ought to feel oppressed by. A three button suit. What right do you have to be wearing a three-button suit and striped tie? Your grandfather was a slave, he didn't go to Harward.

CLAY. My grandfather was a night watchman (18)

Even though Clay tries to place himself away from the stratifications of race and gender, Lula directly imposes his black origin on him. Lula calls him “an escaped nigger”. (29)

According to Bhabha, the hybrid subject is not a third subject resulting from the encounter of two opposing cultures and identities, but is in fact the presence of the dominant culture tainted by the oppressed one. It is a result of the influence and resistance of an oppressed culture from its hegemonic counterpart. Clay’s masculinity itself is a hybrid one. He creates a macho image before Lula affirming to the stereotype created by Whites regarding Black masculinity. Clay seemed to be ashamed of his blackness. That is why he preferred white outfits and maneuvers. He associates himself with Charles Baudelaire. Even though Lula teases him and his true black culture, Clay appears composed as he believes that as the best acceptable way of behaving among Whites.

Bhabha recalls Fanon when he says that colonial identities are always a matter of flux and agony. Fanon notices that psychic trauma results when the colonial subject realizes that he can never attain the whiteness he has been taught to derive, to shed the blackness that he learn to devalue. It is this confusion that is reflected in Clay’s final rant towards Lula. He becomes the mouthpiece of all African Americans when he says, “Now shut up and let me talk . . . I could murder you now” (33). Clay does not have an accurate understanding of his (hybrid) identity. The subway turns into a space where his double consciousness comes into clash and overrides each other. He announces,

CLAY. If I am a middle class fake white man . . . let me be. And let me be in the way I want . . . and let me be in the way I want. Uncle Tom. Thomas. Whoever. (34)

He speaks out the frustration of every hybrid individual who fails to find a grip in the ‘third space’ where the daydreams of American integration falls off. He continues

CLAY. and I sit here, in this buttoned up suit to keep myself from cutting all your throats . . . A whole people of neurotics struggling to keep from being sane. And the only thing that would cure the neurosis would be your murder . . . just murder! Would make us all sane. (35)

However Lula is successful in bringing out the essential blackness in Clay. Once the real Clay appears before her, she loses no second to murder him because the real Clay is dangerous than the white middle class Clay.

The play portrays the hopelessness of integration. Malcolm X calls this “token integration” which can only be a “token solution”. One can be an American but only at the cost of losing himself. Leslie Adelson correctly remarks this. The imaginary bridge between two worlds is designed to keep discrete worlds apart as much as it pretends to bring them together. This in-betweenness is a transitional space between two worlds of belonging. The result of this hybridity and assimilation into the third space is annihilation. Clay unable to come out of his assimilationist self is killed in return. The third space thus is portrayed as the ritual site of human sacrifice.

Amiri Baraka in his interview given to Charles Reilly says, “*Dutchman* is a portrait of America and it was meant to be. It is not just a tale about the seduction the Black middle class, particularly black intellectual experience. It is about a false welcome into the society. Clay is told either you will join us or you are going to be iced. The seductive nature of America is imaginable. Come to be an American; come to be a citizen; come join the party. But the price involved –the immolation, the ridicule, in a very real sense, murder –is very real.” (256)

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