

The Consciousness of Black Identity in Amiri Baraka' Poems

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Abstract

This study explores the significance of new identity for the African-American people as a protest against the discriminative pressures happened from 1960s to 1970s through Amiri Baraka's poems. Baraka said that by proposing their own identity as African-blood Americans, they can show their existence in the American society. He proposed an awareness on the existence of African-American society in all aspects of life, such as the different characters and appearances in literature and tradition. Baraka tries not to follow the traditional rules anymore. With his poems, Amiri Baraka engaged the African-Americans to produce literary products with a strong and prominent style of writing, and adopt African languages. Baraka also supports the movements of so-called *Black Culture* which supported by African-American activists through their poems on the awareness of their real identity as *Black People*.

A. Introduction

The first impression of white Americans on the Africans since the first time they were shipped to America was portrayed in the fifth line of Phillis Wheatley's poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America"/some view our sable race with scornful eye/. (Poems of Phillis Wheatley: A Native African and a Slave : 12). This quotation reflected the white Americans sneering at African's blackness which showed the whites' arrogance. The negative connotation of Black is emphasized by Talmadge Anderson in his *Introduction to African American Studies*, that is, "Black connotes that which is soiled, dirty, foul, horrible, wicked, evil, or bad". The Whites tried to rationalize their unjust and oppressive treatment of African people by

introducing “the Biblical myth of Noah’s son, Ham, the story of God willed that Ham’s son and all his descendants would be black, and he banished them into the depth of Africa particularly in Egypt” (3). Since that time, the Africans had suffered for the whites’ “racism” based on their black skin color,

Indeed, the Africans were treated as slaves, as Schneider explains the term of ‘slave’ in his book *Slavery in America from Colonial Times to the Civil War*, as “Slaves born in Africa who came to North America exchanged the temporary chaos and suffering of the middle passage for the confusion and hardship of life in a strange land. . . . Almost always the slave traders and slave owners who received them treated them as savages to be subdued, workers whose power had to be harnessed, and sources of profit- not as human beings. The slaves had been stripped of their status, their names, their families, and friends, and their customs and culture. They were surrounded by fear, distrust, and sometimes hatred ... They stood naked to misery, not knowing what would happen to them (81), during the slavery the slaves were regarded as inhuman and they experienced a horror life. Donna L. Franklin in her book *Insuring Inequality* quoted Du Bois statements explain that, "there was no family life, no meals, no marriages, no decency, only an endless round of toil and a wild debauch at Christmas time". In addition, Franklin explains that “slave’s wife could be made his master's concubine, his daughter could be outraged, his son whipped, or he himself sold away without being able to protest or lift a preventing finger" (6). The sale of the Africans offspring or family members was as chattel property. The Africans were forcibly denied their language, history, culture, ancestral

ties and homeland affiliation (Anderson 2). Even though slavery drove to the misery, the African American still had a hope to be free from the sufferings one day.

B. Discussion

Being suffering from long time, some activists and other political figures came to a decision to fight back the racial consciousness in which they were treated by whites. Thus, they began to propose their own consciousness which derived from the spirit of Black Nationalist. They declared that all of the thing they had done should be related to “Black Consciousness”, a consciousness that African American should be based on. They had to have their own identity as Black people. Cedric Johnson says that political and ideological lines could be swept away with effective organization and the development of proper “black consciousness” to reveal a solid core of racial interests that connected all African Americans and, for many, all peoples of African descent (88). Thus, Black Power activists announced new race consciousness that placed black identity as the soul of a new militancy (Joseph 3). This means that the African Americans had to have their own identity, and to express this identity, it was necessary to use militant tactics, the tactic that opposed the previous tactic, nonviolent one, proposed by Martin L King Jr.

Hence, Amir Baraka who was involved in the spirit of Black consciousness was called to express his attention and feeling of African Americans’ oppression condition done by white. He tried to encourage those people to move forward for their own existence in all aspects of life.

1. The Call for African American Own Style in Literature

As he spoke in his poem “Look Inside”, it had powerful meaning although it was likely uttered with low tone. He awakened his African American brothers to be more conscious to announce that they were black proudly:

“we are finding out what we are when we rule ourselves

how we sound when we teach ourselves

how we look when we judge our selves

we are finding out, need to

need to

Look Inside, Somebody’s There

the deep picture fronts a sun, rising, new day

to day

to find out how we need to do” (“Look Inside” lines 6-13).

In the poem above, Baraka encouraged black people to know their own identity. To gain the identity, they had to know about themselves first. They had to know what fitted their life. Rules, for example, were things that they should understand. They should live with their own rules, not the rules made by the whites to control them in living their lives. Therefore, they should see themselves first, more importantly their wishes that were internalized in their heart. They had to find out the basic desires they wanted to achieve, such as being free as human beings in doing their rights. To be able to look inside them, the African American people had to force themselves to break the chain in form of the whites’ oppression that tied them over hundred years. Baraka mentioned a sun to symbolize the new days they could have when they could

conquer themselves to be free from the shadow of the whites' oppression. New days always brought new hopes. Therefore, Baraka emphasized that the African Americans had first to find out who they really were until they completely gained in their mind the consciousness as the African descents. After they understood who they really were, they could determine the steps they needed to do. In addition, with emotional tone, Baraka screamed:

LOOK INSIDE !

To find in there, what words we need

objectively consider what skill we lack

objectively consider what must be accomplished

calmly check out the distances, the terrain, our own

dispositions. Look plainly at our strength our weakness

the needed acquisitions. LOOK INSIDE, And outside

too (lines 14-23).

Again, Baraka demanded his people to see and understand themselves first. They had to be themselves completely without imitating other people from different skin colors such as the whites. By knowing about themselves, they would have orderly aspirations to say. They had to consider what they were able to do and what they were not able to do. Therefore, they had to realize their weaknesses so that they could improve them. When they were lack of skills, they had to study more and more in order that they could achieve the specialties they needed such as in protest tactics and education. In protest tactics, for example, they had to know how to break the terrain

that constrained their steps. They had to be able to measure their own weaknesses and qualities to position them when encountering with the whites. Therefore, it was a must for them to know their own characteristics and temperament because by knowing those two things closely, they would be able to manage and control their plans to move forward. After knowing themselves was accomplished, they could start to know the outside party that was the whites as their opponent.

Amiri Baraka kept reminding the African Americans that they were different with the whites. He pointed out that the African Americans again had to determine their own lives. As an individual, Baraka could not defend what the whites needed because the whites had defended their own lives. In the poem, Baraka wrote:

“I cant speak for white folks, they’ll
Speak for themselves
But the rest of us, Everybody Everybody
Everybody, lets us first deals with us”
(Afrikan Revolution lines 41-45).

Baraka said that the whites had to live their own lives and the African Americans had to live theirs. Baraka’s words were not addressed for the white people, but to the African Americans, instead. Therefore, in this poem, Baraka wrote ‘Everybody, lets us first deals with us’. This means that Baraka wanted to stress that it was the time for the African Americans to really focus on what they wanted to do by initiating building shared feelings among them, the feelings that they had to be able to stand on their own feet, not dependent upon the whites’ help anymore. Everybody here all

African American people that had to realize that they should build their own consciousness as African descents.

As African Descents, Amiri Baraka thought that African American need their own literature. He wanted that, as black people, they had to have the art that was related to their own selves, the art that was totally different from the literary mainstreams. Maurice A. Lee says that during the Black Nationalism, Baraka's approach to write a literature was simple, meaning that in making literary works, Blacks had to deny or destroy the art of ruling class (17). In addition, Jerry Gafio Watts said that Amiri Baraka ways to express his art was shown in Baraka essay "Black Aesthetic" in which Baraka revealed that how the black authors wrote was depending on their quality of being. If they had proper black feeling, they would write in appropriately black way. To attain these feelings, they had to "intuit about reality" and "go in to selves". Furthermore, Baraka claimed that "our art reflects our spiritual and life affirming choice" and the greatest achievement for a black writer is not a one-page poem but a life well lived on behalf of the coming black nation (222).

In his literary works, Amiri Baraka tried to convince the African Americans to use their own style to write a poem. Thus, with anger he spoke:

Poems are bullshit unless they are
teeth or trees or lemons piled

On a step (lines 1-3)

Amiri Baraka wanted to highlight that a poem could mean nothing when it was only a poem that had no meaning to the readers. He used the word 'bullshit' to show that a

poem could not deliver any message to the readers because it could not grab the readers' feeling. A poem could be a meaningful one when it could touch the readers' soul by the power of its words. The power here means that the connection that can link the words in a poem to the readers' mind. The connection then builds certain feelings in the readers' heart and mind that in the end the readers can give reactions over the poems. The power here can also be an analogue of a hard snap addressed to a sleeping man until he finally opens his eyes abruptly. Therefore, Amiri Baraka used the word 'teeth' to illustrate that when a poem is created, it must be able to leave impressions in the readers' mind and heart. Next, the impressions should grow bigger and bigger like one that piles wooden logs until the readers can finally open their eyes that there is something in front of them. In the poem above, Amiri Baraka wanted to convey that a poem should be able to deliver a valuable spirit. The valuable spirit here means that the words in the poem can awaken the readers' soul or they can give stimuli for the readers to give reaction over it. The further meaning of valuable spirit can be grabbed by reading Baraka's "Black Art":

“We want ‘poems that kill.’

Assassin poems, Poems that shoot

guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys

and take their weapons leaving them dead

...” (line 19-22).

Amiri Baraka wanted to stress that he produced poems that could be a weapon. The weapon means that a poem can be a means of developing the African Americans'

spirit to battle the whites' oppression. With the spirit, they could fight against the whites to gain their freedom. Therefore, Baraka chose to make poems that could open his people that they also had power when the unity was created among them. The unity could be a very lethal defense in struggle movements because with unity they could be very solid. The solid bond among them could finally fight white cops that spread terrors to the African American people. In addition, Baraka wanted to show that a poem had lives such as having ability to kill people, in this case, white cops that had spread terror to black people. William L. Andrews et.al. in their edited book *The Concise Oxford Companion To African American Literature* mentioned that Baraka was not simply speaking metaphorically. During that period armed self-defense and slogans such as 'Arm yourself or harm yourself' established a social climate that promoted confrontation with the white power structure, especially the police. Additionally, armed struggle was widely viewed as not only a legitimate, but often as the only effective means of black liberation. Black Arts' dynamism, impact, and effectiveness are a direct result of its partisan nature and advocacy of artistic and political freedom (27).

In the six final lines of the poem, Baraka wrote:

"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” (51-56)

Baraka wanted to point out that the African American people should be different with the whites in every aspects of life, including arts. In his poem above, he conveyed a message that the black people had to have their own poems as a means of contributing their aspirations. When their aspirations were gathered fully, those aspirations could lead the black people to create their own world, which was the black world. Therefore, in the poem Baraka emphasized that the black world was very important. Here, Baraka wanted to stress that the black people had to have their identity that was the black world, the world that only belonged to the African Americans people. They had to bear it in their mind or say it out loud to the whites that they were brave to show their own identity as black people. Baraka affirmed that it was the time for the African Americans to accommodate their black interests and needs. William L. Andrews et.al.said that Baraka seminal 1965 poem “Black Art”, quickly became the major poetic manifesto of the Black Arts literary movement (27). Based on the quotation, it can said that the poem “Black Art” also gave the contribution to the existence of black art, and the spirit in black power movement to shape blacks’ own identity.

2. The Call for African American Own Style in Customs and Traditions

The African Americans tried to form their own identity as a black identity. It was not only about the identity as black but more general that the African Americans should know about what blacks were in all aspects of life. Peniel E. Joseph in his edited book *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Right–Black Power*

Era says that “Black Power activists placed the black identity as the soul of a new radicalism. For example, Black Power activists fought for community control of schools, Black Studies programs at colleges and universities, welfare rights, prison reform, and jobs and racial justice for the poor” (3). Baraka was also involved in this kind of reformation. He firmly gave his opinion that to be welcome and existed as a human being, the African Americans should erase the whites’ influence. Baraka said that “to be an American, one must be a murderer, white murderer of colored people. In that logic, for Negroes to qualify as Americans, they had to first “murder” themselves” (66). This statement means that Baraka wanted the African American people to have their own characters as African descents. They had to take away from themselves all attributes related to whites’ life and culture. They had to all customs and cultures brought and made by the white people behind. They would only use and practice things that could show them off as peoples different from the whites.

Related to the statement above, one fact shows that some African American people started to adopt the cultures from Africa such as in clothing (Joseph 230). This means that they tried to begin not following or imitating the whites. Another example showing the African Americans wanted to adopt their ancestors’ cultures was that they celebrated their own holiday named Kwanzaa. Kwanzaa was a celebration to harvest. (Joseph 240). Amiri Baraka himself was also involved in the celebration. In 1969 he announced kwanzaa principles as quoted by Keith Mayes in his article “A Holiday of Our Own”:

“The Nguzo Saba (the principles of Kwanzaa) is the first, the basic, ...The doctrine now is in the head and hands mostly of organization people, and a few key organizers and student leaders around the country. But soon it will be ... available to most of us. It is the central ingredient of the new Nationalist organization. It will transform Black people and by doing this, transform yes, America. You better get ready for it.

(Joseph 229)

This means that the African American people should have their own identity as black people. This would really transform them in their lives in America. Therefore, Baraka wanted to highlight that America had to face that the African Americans also lived there and the African Americans themselves had to be ready to make changes for their better life to be free from any oppression.

Baraka’s announcement triggered the African American activists to openly sound the Kwanzaa holiday to become their Holiday. In addition, Mayes said in 1974 that “It’s time that we as Black People with Black families put down crazy cracker celebrations for something that is for us. Think about it: Easter, Thanksgiving, Passover, Chanukah, X-Mas, Columbus, George Washington, Independence Day, on and on ... Zillions of white holidays and lily whiteimage- but nothing for us” (229). This quotation emphasizes that it was the moment for African Americans to not use the whites’ cultures any longer, in this case the holidays celebrated by the whites, and to accept their own holidays. The holidays celebrated by the whites did not represent the African American cultures because they felt that they did not get the meaning of

the holidays toward their life. Independence Day celebration, for example, did not give any significant symbols for the African Americans to really feel their freedom.

Kwanzaa was chosen to become the African American holiday because the African American activist agreed that Kwanzaa represented them as African descents. It was their real holiday in order to separate them from imitating the whites' culture. Mayes explained that the determination of Kwanzaa as the African American holiday because "Karenga, the creator of Kwanzaa in United States of America, borrowed and synthesized practices from the African continent, then applied them to the African American context. He believed that black American culture originated in African traditions—traditions that could lead to freedom and liberation from white cultural domination" (230). Based on the quotation, it can be said that Baraka as the African American who got tied to the African culture and tradition asked the African Americans to practice and get involved into the tradition of the African culture and traditions. The practices were as the way to express their difference from the white. Their black identity would bond them one another. Due to this, the African Americans would come together and hold hand to hand to express them as spoken by Baraka in the poem "US":

white folks plotting our character, and mental and political
and legal and economic, and physical assassination.

...

We say PamojaTutashinda,

PamojaTutashida. Together we will win. (lines 26-30)

In the poem, Baraka mentioned that the whites had really determined what the African Americans should do. They made rules that limited the black people's steps. The white system had dominated and restrained the African Americans' life. As a result, they lived in poor and oppressed conditions. Baraka said that the African Americans were tortured both mentally and physically. However, despite the sufferings they experienced, the African Americans should plant in their mind and heart that they could go through the hardship when they were united. Baraka wrote 'PamojaTutashinda' taken from Swahili language (the language that is used by the majority peoples in Africa) which means 'Together we will win' (<http://www.duboisl.org/creed.html>). When unity among the African Americans was not accomplished, they could not uniform their voice to determine the next action that they would take. Therefore, Baraka set fire through his words for the African Americans to open their eyes that unity was very important to battle the whites' domination. He used a language from one of African countries to remind his people that the African Americans were from one big continent called Africa and, therefore, they should have one uniform perception to struggle for their freedom against the whites' oppression. This means that they had to stand on their own feet, struggling for what they wished for. Everything had to be self-sufficient, meaning that they had to fulfill what they needed by trying to meet it with their own efforts. Cultures for example, had to be created by black people that represented the black identity.

C. Closing

The discriminatory conditions experienced by the African Americans that gave bad impact toward their life such as lack in some sectors like education and employment affected their economic aspect. Most of the African Americans still lived in poverty at the time. Due to the gap conditions, Baraka argued the African Americans to protest for their better life. The African Americans had the same right to get better education and schooling, work, healthier place to live and other chances that could make a significant progress to prove their existence among the Whites' society. Baraka found out that to start this, they had to know themselves first by recognizing their own identity. Baraka encouraged the African Americans to know their own identity. In order to exist, they needed to break the whites' oppression that tied them over hundred years. Baraka kept encouraging African Americans to establish their own Identity as African descents to stir their own life. They had to escape from whites' ways of writings and customs or traditions.

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