THE REVOLUTIONARY AND TRAUMATIC HISTORY OF SLAVERY IN AMIRI BARAKA'S THE SLAVE

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الثورية والصدمة في تاريخ العبودية في مسرحية "العبد "لأميري بركة

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Abstract:

This research discusses Amiri Baraka's one-act play The Slave (1964) through which he reflects his revolutionary ideas about the traumatic past of slavery and the continuous oppression of black's community. The Play clearly depicts the tension between the American blacks and the racial whites living in America. By portraying Walker Vessels, the African American protagonist, as both a revolutionary and a slave—apparently a rebel leader—who carries on the heritage of black armed resistance from the antebellum South, The Slave challenges received histories about the era of slavery by creatively dislocating and extending the scope of the militancy of the sixties. This study argues the haunting memory of race relations in the United States and acts of armed resistance by rewriting historical narratives as Baraka's modern revolutionary figure carries the history of slave revolts in The Slave. Moreover, Baraka ensures that even in its imaginary circumstances, The Slave portrays an unfulfilled revolution which encompasses the unfulfilled dreams of change and end of slavery.
Keywords; Amiri Baraka, The Slave, The ritual of history, Revolution and History

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الملخص:

يناقش هذا البحث مسرحية "العبد" ذات الفصل الواحد للكاتب أميري بركة (١٩٦٤) والتي يعكس من خلالها أفكاره الثورية حول الماضي المؤلم للعبودية والقمع المستمر لمجتمع السود. تصور المسرحية بوضوح التوتر بين السود الأمريكيين والبيض العنصريين الذين يعيشون في أمريكا من خلال تصوير شخصية وولكر، بطل المسرحية الأمريكي من أصل أفريقي، على أنه ثوري وعبد – على ما يبدو زعيم متمرد – يحمل تراث المقاومة المسلحة السوداء من جنوب ما قبل الحرب، تلقت تحديات العبيد تاريخا حول عصر العبودية من خلال الخلع الإبداعي وتوسيع نطاق التشدد في الستينيات. وتغوص في الذاكرة المؤرقة للعلاقات العرقية في الولايات المتحدة وأعمال المقاومة المسلحة من خلال إعادة كتابة الروايات التاريخية حيث تحمل شخصية بركة الثورية الحديثة تاريخ ثورات العبيد في العبد. علاوة على ذلك، يضمن بركة أنه حتى في ظروفه الخيالية، يصور العبد ثورة تشمل أحلام التغيير وإنهاء العبودية التي لم تتحقق.

الكلمات المفتاحية ; أميري بركة، العبد، طقوس التاريخ، الثورة والتاريخ

Introduction

Baraka is widely regarded as a key creator of the Black Arts Movement and the Black Aesthetic worldview that defined it. Critical examinations of this movement help in elucidating Baraka's legacy and the philosophers with whom he engaged early in his career. Smethurst 2005 and Avilez 2015 look at the movement's social and historical contexts, the first by charting its evolution across the country, and the second by looking into the movement's relationship to the prior civil rights movement. Gayle 1971 is an excellent book that offers a variety of perspectives on the concept of Black Aesthetics and the conditions in which it emerged. The meaning and significance of the Black Aesthetic have been the subject of rising debate. This aesthetic, according to Ongiri 2010, is a reflection of urban black culture. Dubey (1994) investigates the gender disparities that are grafted onto Black Aesthetic theory. Crawford (2008), building on this work, explores masculinize in the Black aesthetic, but demonstrates that it is insecure. Shockley (2011) suggests that the style is full of various possibilities, which is why Black A is so popular. (Avilez 49–64)

During the early 1960s, Baraka accepted nationalist goals for his separate groups and was drawn to revolutionary ideologies, an impact that can be seen in The Slave. However, as Elam notes, Baraka was not only an artist, but also an activist and social thinker

for his respective movement. (Elam3) Baraka's early activism and plays emphasized racial and ethnic consciousness based on militancy and nationalistic ideas,and he shared a social and artistic vision that emphasized racial and ethnic consciousness based on militancy and nationalistic ideas.

The Cuban Revolution impacted Baraka because it provided a striking example of a successful armed insurrection on the American continent. In the case of Baraka, his tripto Cuba in the early 1960s was a watershed moment. (Komozi 52-54)

The Slave aesthetically deals with the history of violent militant resistance by minorities, which is often disregarded in modern social discourses in favor of ahistorical narrative that cites civil rights fighters' nonviolent struggle. The Slave is frequently analyzed as a confrontational and radical social protest piece that tries to raise racial and ethnic consciousness. (Sollors134-138) The prospect of armed resistance and militant confrontation by some people of color also contributed to social

change, and Baraka's performance is significant because it contradicts the popular narrative that nonviolent resistance was the only way for people of color to achieve social gains in the 1960s and 1970s. In his early nonfiction, collected in Home: Social Essays (1965), which condemns the conditions of blacks living in

urban cities and the nonviolent methods advocated by black civil rights leaders to solve racial and economic inequality, Baraka's confrontational rhetoric, shared by emerging radical activists such as Eldridge Cleaver and Huey Newton, is evident. Baraka defiantly argues that the "struggle is not simply for 'equality'" but "to completely *free* the black man from the domination of the white man."(Baraka 84)Baraka frames his confrontational stance and social demands based in part on his first-hand experiences dealing with inequalityand discrimination in urban enclaves such as Harlem.(Baraka94-95) The Slave portrays blacks' simmering frustrations and responses to a deep-rooted sense of despair, echoing the seemingly mindless violence during race riots in certain major urban areassuch as Watts, Detroit, and Newark in the 1960s..

The ritual was embraced by Baraka and the Theater Movement artists because they believed rituals were more powerful than talking heads. They thought Western theater was mostly about people talking in a drawing room. African American artists desired to break free from the drawing room model, which Vessels' poetry attempted to do butwhich Easley dismisses as "Vessels's poetry." "inept formless poetry. The poetry of ritual drama." (Slave 55-56).

1.1. Amiri Baraka: A Life Sketch

Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) has been cited by many critics as the creator of and foremost writer in the new black arts movement, and he is acknowledged by many otherblack artists as their inspiration or model. Despite his importance and the comparativelylarge body of materials published about Baraka, very few critical and scholarly works of stature have yet appeared. The relative absence of thorough and accurate school

arshiphas exacerbated the difficulties of producing appreciative yet objective criticism of works often published in ephemeral outlets and written by an author whose fame frequently interferes with lucid appraisal. Born LeRoi Jones in Newark, New Jersey, on October 7, 1934, Baraka changed his name (roughly in the summer of 1968) to Ameer (prince) Baraka (blessedness). Within months he had added the title "Imamu" (spiritual leader). By early 1970 he had adopted the Swahili form "Amiri" in place of the Arabic "Ameer." After his conversion to Marxism in the next decade, he decided toforgo the title Imam, with its "bourgeois nationalist" implications. Although for a timehe was sometimes called "Chairman" or "Comrade," by 1977 he preferred to be addressed as "Amiri." In order to suggest which part of Baraka's career is under discussion, the name Jones is employed to refer to the early period and Baraka is used for the later years. (Dace7)

Bibliography Because so many of Baraka's works, especially his poems, first appearedin fugitive books, broadsides, and ephemeral periodicals not even included in the Indexto Little Magazines, it is difficult for critics to compile their own working bibliographies. Readers who aim at thoroughness in their acquaintance with the Barakacanon and its criticism must therefore employ one of the published checklists, but theseare not of equal usefulness. (ibid)

2.1. Revolution and History in Baraka's *The Slave*

By portraying Walker Vessels as both a revolutionary and a slave—presumably a rebel leader—who carries on the legacy of black armed resistance from the antebellum South, The Slave challenges received histories about the era of slavery by creatively dislocating and extending the scope of the militancy of the sixties. Some critics have criticized Baraka's handling of the slavery era in an experimental form in other plays such as *Slave Ship* (1967); (Watts 269-93) The experimental interaction with history contained in The Slave, on the other hand, has received absolutely no attention. To address historical misconceptions about the treatment of slaves, Baraka's play evokes the role of the slave uprising leader, a figure who, before to the 1960s, tended to be mediated through the writings of white historians and writers (Gray6). In his nonfiction,Baraka debunks the myth of the content slave, as well as attempts to create myths in historiography and

social discourses that portray blacks as passive individuals throughout slavery "didn't mind being [slaves].”(Baraka98) Baraka rejects this view by emphasizing the tradition of armed slave resistance, since according to Baraka, “the records of slave revolts are too numerous to support” the “faked conclusion” that slavescoexist harmoniously with their masters.(ibid)

On stage, Baraka subverts white history by evoking the heritage of black self- determination dating back to David Walker, as well as armed resistance by slave revoltleaders such as Gabriel Prosser and Denmark Vesey, by naming the major character Vessels, as Werner Sollors points out.

Vessels is introduced in the prologue of The Slave as a character who tries to express his problems but fails owing to his status as a field slave, which shows his social marginalization. Vessels appears as an apparition in the prologue, which obfuscates chronological time. “*old field slave*” who is “much older than [he] look[s] . . . or maybemuch younger” at different periods during the play. Vessels initially takes the form of a seer, elder statesman, or a black preacher, but as he attempts to express his thoughts,he grows “*anxiou[s]*,” “*less articulate*,” and “*more ‘field hand’ sounding*” (Watts83). Scholars agree on the cryptic nature of Vessels’s opening speech. Nonetheless, while being a slave, Vessels' restlessness and hostile intent can be shown when he says,

"[w]eare liars, and we are murderers. Because of his condition as a slave, Vessels is unable to communicate effectively; as a result, his inability to communicate effectively marginalizes him while also connecting him to the emerging restlessness and frustration among disenfranchised blacks, which finds physical expression in an altered social context in the play's subsequent acts. Signaling the ineffectiveness of rhetoric, Vessels turns to physical violence as a tool to address his social grievances.

On stage, The Slave destabilizes mainstream historical narratives of slave oppression by presenting a decentered subject with a history of armed resistance and the ability to challenge the established quo through open revolt. The play's first act propels Vessels into a contemporary city in the 1960s where he becomes the leader of a "black liberation movement" who is able to mount an effective military offensive against whites (58). As Larry Neil observes, Vessels in the contemporary context "demands a confrontation with history. His only salvation lies in confronting the physical and psychological forces that have made him and his people powerless." (Neil70) Vessels refers to the source of his actions when he maintains that he is fighting "against three hundred years of oppression" (72). Vessels, moreover, echoes the intent of former slave rebel leaders such as Nat Turner when he boasts that he "single-handedly. . . promoted a bloody situation

where white and black people are killing each other" Neil puts the brutality seen in The Slave into context by stating that, despite Western society's anger against

the oppressed, the oppressed are nonetheless enslaved, "it sanctimoniously deplore[d] violence or self-assertion on the part of the enslaved."(ibid 71-72) Vessels's armed resistance—taken as a continuation of past instances of slave rebellion—figuratively subverts the historical record since an organized and open slave revolt in the U.S. did not last more than a few days. *The Slave* attempts, as Baraka notes in his often-cited essay, "The Revolutionary Theatre" (1964), to take blacks' revolutionary "dreams andgive them a reality"

As a result, Baraka's play goes beyond depicting 1960s militancy and radicalism by presenting a fictional counterpoint to the historical record of slave insurrection suppressions.

Despite the play's depiction of a race war, it emphasizes the dichotomy between Vessels' revolutionary aims and his equivocal views toward whites as a result of his previous embrace of racial pluralism. Although the war has been raging for months andhas tangible consequences, since it is noted that Vessels's "noble black brothers are killing what's left of the city," or rather "what's left of this country" (49), it is only alluded to intermittently rather than enacted. The conflict acts mostly as a backdrop toVessels, Grace,

and Easley's verbal abuse, physical brutality, and aggressiveness in the living room Vessels and Grace's feud stems in part from Baraka's radicalization and personal problems to reconcile his black nationalism with his marriage to a white lady,Hettie Jones. The three protagonists' emotionally intense moments and recriminations reveal the boiling feelings of fury and racial hostility that existed before the war.

The Slave depicts a conflict between a black radical and a white liberal, and Vessels' fight with Easley represents his desire to transcend his past and pursue his revolution. According to Samuel Hay, in The Slave and other plays from the same era, "Baraka repeats Baldwin's theme [in *Blues for Mr. Charlie* (1964)] that burning all bridges to white liberals is the first step toward liberation. (Hay 95) Vessels does not direct his hatred against prejudiced whites but against Easley, a college professor with a "liberal education, and a long history of concern for minorities"(52).

Beyond expressing Baraka's radicalization and disillusionment with urban blacks' marginalization in the 1960s, The Slave deftly contextualizes its radical and militant message by combining Vessels' revolutionary goals with historical examples of black armed resistance. The play's longevity stems from its reminder that during the 1960s, social recognition was gained not only through

nonviolent protest, but also through thethreat of violent conflict. Aesthetically, *The Slave* uses innovative techniques to convey

postmodern fears about the challenge and subversion of mainstream historical narratives about slavery.; Vessels's discomforting revolutionary message that stresses militancy, nationalist aspirations, and radical actions in the face of racial oppression stands as a form of historical memory that reflects the contentious history of race relations—not only during the sixties but also at different junctions in American history.

The passive scapegoats, who are oblivious of their participation in ritual deeds, are the most common type in Baraka's early plays, and they doom themselves and their communities to a life of destructive patterns. Their apparent knowledge of the various types of European American cultural literacy just hides their ignorance of the oppressive reality. In response to this hilarious predicament, Baraka's Black Nationalist plays emphasize the necessity for new forms of awareness, with origins in Africa rather than Europe, to liberate the African American community from the historical and psychological factors that compel such mindless repetition. Baraka constructs rituals that substitute symbolically white

scapegoats for the metaphorically black victims of his earlier works, inverting the usual moral symbolism of European American civilization. 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. (Benston)

Because the rituals of Baraka's Black Nationalist play typically end in violence directed against whites, or symbolically white members of the black bourgeoisie, or components of the individual black psyche, many critics have accused him of perpetuating the violence and racism he purports to condemn. These critics typically accuse him of oversimplifying reality, citing his later drama's shift from psychologically nuanced sarcastic forms to much more obvious allegorical modes; the most adamant regard his post-Dutchman pieces as strident propaganda devoid of all aesthetic and moral merit. Such critics disregard the crucial importance of Baraka's changing awareness of his audience by basing their judgments only on European American aesthetic ideals. Baraka turned almost solely to an African American public more familiar with the storefront preacher and popular music groups such as the Temptations than August

Strindberg and Edward Albee, rejecting the primarily

white avant-garde audience that praised his early work. Baraka assumed a didactic voice in order to focus attention on immediate issues of survival and community or class defense by developing a performance style in accordance with this cultural worldview. (ibid)

Baraka had no idea he comprehended and understood what he was talking about when he talked about ritual drama He didn't realize ritual was actually history, the lives of African Americans, until after he had written The Slave: We perform our lives. We live our lives every day. We might think we do different things but a lot of the things we do are the same things: we get up, we go to school, we eat, and we go to sleep, and then we get up again. The sun and the moon. The same." And he adds that people go through infinite changes, not in the sense of displacements; but in the sense of becoming. People have "to keep coming to keep going." It is the constant of always the same thing, but always changing. And this is what ritual means: "the constant of consciousness, and reconsciousness and re-reconsciousness."" The structure of The Slave is circular, like the seasons cycle, like the sun and the moon. The play is introduced by Vessels dressed as an old field slave, and is the same character who closes it. This circular ending

may seemingly imply that no change has occurred, and yet there has been a change; i.e., the achievement of consciousness; in this case, a recovery of a hidden and painful identity. That first change, first step, will lead to new changes, new consciousness and reconsciousness and rereconsciousness. The repetition that Baraka points out is one of the elements of ritual and an essential component of African American folk and musical tradition. Shelby Steele claims the new African American theater ritual is achieved through the repetition of symbols, values and patterns from drama to drama "rather than the traditional religious method of repeating a single ceremony until it becomes ritual" (Steele 33). And, besides repetition there are other literary devices used by African American artists in order to attain ritual, as formulated by Steele: symbol, allegory, language style, recurring themes and characterization. And these devices appear from play to play, rather than in every play (Ibid).

The old slave figure that appears in Baraka's prologue." Fable in a Prologue and Two Acts" "as Baraka denominates The Slave, mentions the need of a metalanguage, for "your brown is not [his] brown, etc. We need something not included here." {Slave

45 .(Sanders claims that the metalanguage mentioned by the character is action itself. Furthermore, the brutality that acts as the play's backdrop "emphasizes primarily the torment of the protagonists and reflects the more mangled communication than the

uncompromising nature of the act that approaches as the dialogue comes to an end" (Sanders 153). Sanders believes that the child's cry at the end represents "the basic expression to which [Vessels] is reduced" and symbolically shows that a new language must come (Ibid). The importance of the ritual of insult in African American culture is analyzed by Levine as a verbal art form. Insults and street language are present in most of the Movement plays, and Baraka's did especially emphasize their use, as observed in The Slave. Levine maintained that the use of ritual insult was the ideal outlet for his rage. Ritual insult became more common during a period when African Americans were particularly targeted for assaults and insults to their dignity.Ritual language play (e.g., insult in the form of the dozens") could be used "as a mechanism for teaching and sharpening the ability to control emotions and anger; an ability that was often necessary for survival" (Levine 358). This is exactly how Vessels functions at the

start of the play. He employs the insult ritual, and the frequency of the insults rises throughout the play. Finally, Vessels learns that talking—for example, insults—is insufficient. He doesn't want to use words to contain his rage, therefore he turns into action himself. His chosen deed, in fact, redeems him. The expression of hatred becomes a crucial component of the new language of action. In the character of Vessels, Baraka uses hatred as an energy force. In plays like The Baptism and The Toilet, he employs this force as well. Hate, on the other hand, is a ritualistic way of expressing a feeling that leads to love. Malcolm X, like Baraka, saw hate as a cleaning force, according to Glen Bums. Malcolm X devised a strategy for using every method available to help African Americans overcome their animosity. Clay, in Dutchman, and Vessels, in The Slave, reclaim their identities by expressing their hatred. (Burns 278, 277).

The 1960s Art and Theater Movement aimed to face and study African American history, and while African Americans had previously connected slavery with a past they did not want to be associated with, slavery in the 1960s took on a new meaning and perspective. In this line, Larry Neal mentions the "red-mouthed grinning field

slave" who is the emblem of Vessels's army, and he explains: "The revolutionary army has taken one of the most hated symbols of the Afro-American past and radically altered its meaning. This is the supreme act of freedom, available only to those who have liberated themselves psychically" (Neal 35). Neal asserts that Vessels 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. Therefore, he comes to understand that the world must be restructured along

spiritual imperatives" (Neal 34-35). Moreover, the confrontation between the Black radical and the White liberal-as represented by Vessels and Easley-is a symbol of larger confrontations occurring between the Third World and Occident, between the colonizer and the colonized, between the slave master and the slave (Ibid). Baraka used music to express freedom, and music has a close relationship with his work. We see this in Wesel's character with a shift from laughter to anger and from English to black English, he used all the means he could to express himself.

Amiri Baraka describes spending many hours alone, thinking, contemplating, and trying to dig deep into oneself in a joumey of self-discovery throughout his youth in the Air Force and at university in his autobiography:

"I was stretched between two Uves and perceptions (I've told you it was four Black Brown Yellow White— but actually it's two or the real side, the two extremes, the black and the white, with the middle two but their boxing gloves)." Baraka, torn between the two extremes, finally chooses a side and commits to only one: the Black one.

In his play THE SLAVE, Baraka's moment of transition and finial decision to remain on the Black side is represented. Walker Vessels, now on the Black side, has made his final decision to become a revolutionary and fight for his people, after leaving his White wife.

The inversion of a cultivated racist image, as with the Signifying Monkey," is part of the African American history of signifying. According to Henry L. Gates, "discourse modalities of figuration themselves".

Signifying is equivalent with figuration, and the essence of signifying necessitates repetition. Signifying also connotes living "in the margins of speech, constantly punning, ever trooping, ever embodying the ambiguities of Iknguage...

[It is the African American] trope for repetition and revision, indeed [the] trope of chiasmus, repeating and reversmg simultaneously." The use of signifying in African American tradition implies the tradition's self-reflective quality. (Gates 52, 51, 52). Furthermore, Gates asks that African American literature be compared since it contains writings with a "complex twofold formal antecedent, the Western and the black," according to Gates (Gates xxiv). The figure of the slave has a twofold connotation in Baraka's play. Slavery physically refers to the enslavement of individuals, but it also refers to slave rebellions

in the struggle for liberation in African American history—not a passive acceptance of such a position. As a result, in African American history, there have been two types of slaves: the house slave, a symbol of subjugation, and the field slave, a rebellious possibility who would seek any opportunity to flee his owner. The latter is the one that opens.

The Slave is a fictional character. Vessels, as Brown points out, "represents both the past and the present".

militancy (both older and younger)" (Brown 150). This distinction, which was not introduced by Sollors,

demonstrates that Sollors' statement isn't entirely applicable to the play. Vessels is depicted as an old field slave, according to Sollors, who defines this character as someone who "remains the extremal entertainer, the poet, the 'slave' unable to liberate either himself or others" (Sollors 137). Despite the fact that he is a slave towards the end, he forgets that Vessels is a master.

He is still a militant slave, but that does not mean he is still enslaved and unable to work. Emancipate others or emancipate himself, Baraka believes that our past, our lives, are a ritual, but even in the repetition, there are changes that keep us coming back to keep us going.

CONCLUSION

The Slave revolves around the haunting memory of race relations in the United States and acts of armed resistance by rewriting historical narratives as Baraka's modern revolutionary figure carries the history of slave revolts. Even in its imaginary circumstances, The Slave portrays an unfulfilled revolution. By integrating the passion that poetry and music communicate, Baraka builds a liberating process from Western form, as well as a new aesthetics, in which ritual becomes an important approach towards that

goal. Baraka's Slave is a transitional composition in the direction of new theatrical forms being discovered.

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