

CULTURAL PARANOIA IN AMIRIE BARAKA'S SOMEBODY BLEW UP AMERICA

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Contemporary American poetry plays significant role in the cultural life of the United States. American poets have tried to fit into place into the shaping of American life and attitudes. They have always contributed to the public aspects of American life. Their poems and activities on certain occasions stirred up national debate and led to clashes with different forms of political authority.

Amiri Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America" (2001) raised a lot of debate because of what happens when Amiri, motivated by his position of cultural irrelevance to state things against the main-stream of American culture. Baraka himself was known for a generalized antiwhite sentiment. He represents the shallowness of white culture in his poem. Baraka thinks that the black man is not an integral part of America, and that he has no cultural identity of his own. He attributes the universal condemnation of his poem, "Somebody Blew Up America" to the failure of interpreting it as a literary text rather than as an example of hate speech.¹

Paranoia is a thought process, thought to be heavily influenced by anxiety or fear, often to the point of irrationality and delusion. Paranoid thinking typically includes persecutory beliefs concerning a perceived threat towards oneself. Historically, this characterization was used to describe any delusional state.²

Baraka accuses his critics of ignoring the message in his poem, "Somebody Blew Up America". The message of his poem attacks the systematic discrimination, exploitation, and oppression of ethnic groups worldwide in the name of false ideologies. It shows how Black Americans have suffered from domestic terrorism since being kidnapped into US chattel slavery, Klan, Skin Heads, Domestic Nazis, Lynching, denial of rights, national oppression, racism, character assassination. For Baraka, it is the white paranoid oppressors who have exploited the blacks.

Baraka departed his association with the Beat Poets, committing himself for writing as a Black writer. He left Greenwich Village and his colleagues Charles Olsen and Allen Ginsberg and moved to Harlem and a new life as a cultural nationalist. In this black nationalist period in poetry, Baraka changed his name

from Leroi Jones to Amiri Baraka , and this period can also be characterized as a moment of intense hostility toward whites. Baraka hated white people so publicly, for one reason, because he thinks that the blacks had been so publicly tied up with them before.³

"Somebody Blew Up America" is not a lament for the death of thousands of people, nor it is a call for an act of revenge. But it offers an arresting attack against the ills of imperialism and evils of racism which are the main reasons behind the attacks of 11th September in America. The poet manifests in a panoramic way the terrorist episodes throughout American history. All acts of racial discrimination allude to the responsibility of the white supremacy with their imperialist and racist thinking over all kinds of terrorism in America and in the whole world.

Baraka was accused and stigmatized severely for the reading, "Somebody blew up America". The Anti-Defamation League charged the poet with spreading hate speech and promoting anti-Semitism. The League promptly asked the Democratic governor of New Jersey, James E. McGreevey, to demand the poet's resignation.

The revolutionary writings of Imamu Baraka, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Eldridge Cleaver, Malcolm X and other writers show that "the black man is not an integral part of America, that he has no cultural identity, that he is, in a word, invisible."⁴

"Somebody Blew Up America" is a rhythmical free-verse poem, consisting of over two-hundred lines, most of them arranged into short stanzaic units of varying length. The poet begins a series of accusatory "who" questions with which he catalogues and condemns racist and imperialist abuses. The opening stanza functions as a statement to refute any possible misinterpretations of the poem:

(All thinking people
oppose terrorism
both domestic
& international...
But one should not
be used
To cover the other)

(1-7)

These epigraphic sentences function as a declaration to show that the poet wants to neutralize himself by opposing all acts of terrorism. But the lines, 'But one should not be used to cover the other', indicate that there is something inside the speaker. The speaker does not want to hide the causes and acts of terrorism, which are instigated by the racial discrimination exercised upon the different strata of people in the world. This line foreshadows that the speaker already knows something about the causes of the attacks of 11th September, which is associated with certain cultural and political contexts of the speaker himself. David L. Smith states:

a poet makes his most valuable contributions to the revolutionary process by expressing vividly the particularity of a given historical situation or by showing the relationship between individual consciousness and the collective historical experience. From this perspective some of Baraka's early poems and a few of his very recent ones appear most admirable, while many of his famous black nationalist poems appear more polemical than poetic.⁵

Baraka suggests two contradicting narratives of September 11 attacks. The first narrative is the governmental one, which states that America is targeted by terrorists. The second one is of Baraka which intends to argue that the causes of terrorism lie in the oppressive and racist strategies of America towards its citizens and the world as a whole. While mass media depicts the poem as nothing more than an exposition of Baraka's hopelessly paranoid personality, "Somebody Blew Up America" is a provocative poem with a fierce commitment to social change.

The poem enhances Baraka's sense of cultural paranoia in the sense that it incorporates the same thematic concerns and rhetorical strategies that have long characterized his political viewpoints and aesthetic philosophy. As an African American poet writing at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Baraka is still engaged in the struggle of existence culturally and politically. Baraka's poetry follows the revolutionary tradition of African American poetry that envisions art as a vehicle for political and social action.⁶

The poem traces the causes and acts of terrorism. It manifests the discrepancy between false ideals of liberty in America and its racist reality. Many people still lack the civil rights and live in bad conditions in the United States. Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America" questions the causes and acts of violence, oppression, and injustice.

The rhetorical questions delivered by the poet indicates the cultural context of the speaker. They give an impression that the speaker suffers the inferiority and racist thinking by the allusions to figures like 'Jessie Helms' or 'Sharon' who stands for racism and extremity.

Baraka exploits the innuendo through the use of negatives to say that the one responsible for the attacks is the one who is responsible for the genocide of Indians and the oppression of blacks:

It wasn't our American terrorists
It wasn't the Klan or the Skin heads
Or the them that blows up nigger
Churches, or reincarnates us on Death Row

(12-15)

Reading Baraka's poem in terms of his antagonistic aesthetics to the fake moralities and policies of America helps to interpret his hostile views and his call to destroy America. Baraka thinks that the blacks are culturally, socially and politically oppressed and deprived of their rights. Poets like Baraka, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Gwendolyn Brooks have the cultural paranoia which motivated them to write poems within the African American poetic idiom.⁷

The aesthetics of the Black poetry adheres to certain tenets. It believes that art in general and poetry in particular are great weapons. It stresses the responsibility of the artist to draw from and return something to the Black community. Also, it is nonpersonal in the sense that the poet does not reflect his own personal feelings on a subject, but voices the collective feelings of his people towards a subject that concerns the community.⁸

The conventions and aesthetics of Black Arts poetry, in conjunction with its sociopolitical context show that poetry is meant to be heard by blacks and overheard by whites:

I think, however, that this is appearance only, and it will be the serendipitous consequence of my primary argument to show that, while Black Arts poetry very likely does depend for its effect on the division of its audience along racial lines, it also achieves its maximum impact in a context in which it is understood as being heard directly by whites and overheard by blacks.⁹

Baraka exploits a rhetorical strategy of 'Who' questions, whose answers agree that the speaker of the poem directs his accusations towards the racially prejudiced Whites who exterminated the Indians and persecuted the blacks since the time of shipping them out of their homes in Africa to be slaves in the United States.

Who got fat from plantations

Who genocided Indians

Tried to waste the Black nation

(31-33)

It has been widely held that the fundamental characteristic of Black Arts poetry is its powerful antiwhite rhetoric. Baraka is known for his an antiwhite sentiment, which is manifested in his poem, "Somebody Blew Up America". White America is viewed in Baraka's poem as a destructive force not only for the blacks but for all humans. Baraka addresses all those who are culturally deprived of their identities and are politically disadvantaged of their rights.

Who make the credit cards

Who get the biggest tax cut

Who walked out of the Conference

Against Racism

Who killed Malcolm, Kennedy & his Brother

Who killed Dr King, Who would want such a thing?

Are they linked to the murder of Lincoln?

Who invaded Grenada

Who made money from apartheid

Who keep the Irish a colony

Who overthrow Chile and Nicaragua later

(145-155)

Having in mind the cultural and political background of Baraka interprets the cruel attacks against his poem, "Somebody Blew Up America". Reading one of his significant poems, 'SOS' published in Dudley Randall's anthology The Black Poets 1971, and printed on the title page for the section, shows Baraka's quest

for an appropriate nationalistic voice that gathers the blacks in a nationalistic unity among people of African descent ¹⁰:

Calling black people

Calling all black people, man woman child

Wherever you are, calling you, urgent, come in

Black People, come in, wherever you are, urgent, calling

you, calling all black people

calling all black people, come in, black people,

come on in.

SOS (1-8)

That nationalistic unity of the blacks is directed against the identity of the "enemy". The black writers of the 1960s stated clearly that the enemy was certainly the white "establishment." The identification of a generalized White foe became a central strategy in the Black Arts movement in general and in Baraka's poetry in particular. ¹¹

Here, in "Somebody Blew Up America", Baraka exploits the same approach. He is still questing the nationalistic spirit and voice but this time not the African black ones only. He questions wider populace this time through his 'who'. He addresses all the people all over the world who are in the same context of cultural paranoia and political deprivation because of the racial discrimination and cultural annihilation of the Whites in America. He questions the various layers that constitute the American society even the Whites themselves. He is guided by a passion associated with racial attitudes. He directs his questions to instigate the sense of rage and anger inside everyone terrorized by the American policy and to diagnose the major reason behind the attacks of 11 September:

Who killed the most niggers

Who killed the most Jews

Who killed the most Italians

Who killed the most Irish

Who killed the most Africans

Who killed the most Japanese

Who killed the most Latinos

Who/Who/Who

(94-101)

The poet acknowledges all those who have been oppressed by racist, terrorist and fascist forces that become rich through exploitation. Baraka does want to back up an international war in the name of "War against terrorism" to celebrate the white military dictatorship over the world, and to drain super profits from the coloured people and the majority of the world ¹²:

Who want the world to be ruled by imperialism and

National oppression and Terror

Violence, and hunger and poverty.

210-212

Baraka does not accuse directly anyone for the attacks of 11th September, but he leads the reader of his poem to certain points in common knowledge that leads to the causes of these terrorists acts. The conclusion of the poem does not present answers. The poet associated the sound of the 'who' questions with 'the whistle of a crazy dog':

We hear the questions rise

In terrible flame like the whistle of a crazy dog

Like the acid vomit of the fire of Hell

Who and Who and WHO (+) who who ^

Whoooo and Whooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!

223-227

This image indicates insanity, which concludes and suggests the insanity of answering these questions. This style of interrogation lists all the crimes against humanity, racism, imperialism, class-distinction, starvation, colonialism, and capitalism, which can not be ascribed but to the racial prejudice of the Whites. Although the 'Who' questions are not answered but the whole structure of the poem leads the reader to the implications hidden within the text of "Somebody Body Blew Up America". Therefore, these questions shall be asked and investigated all the time in America for there is no single person or group responsible for the attacks but the whole racists in the world who exploit people socially, culturally and politically.

Notes

1- Piotr Gwiazda, The Aesthetics of Politics/The Politics of Aesthetics: Amiri Baraka's "Somebody Blew up America": Contemporary Literature, Vol. 45, No. 3 (Autumn, 2004), (University of Wisconsin Press Stable). p. 461

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/> Accessed: 07/03/2010

2-<http://en.wikipedia.thefreeencyclopedia.org/wiki/Paranoia>. Accessed on 2011

3- Shelly Eversley, The Real Negro: The Question of Authenticity in Twentieth-Century African American Literature, (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Books, Inc.), p. 61

4- William Cosgrove, Modern Black Writers: The Divided Self : Negro American Literature Forum, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Winter, 1973), (St. Louis University Stable). p. 120

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/> Accessed: 07/03/2010

5- David L. Smith, Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts of Black Art, Vol. 15, No. 1/2, (Duke University Press Stable), p. 236

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/> Accessed: 07/03/2010

6- Gwiazda, p. 477

7- Ibid., p.483

8- Sandra Govan, The Poetry of Black Experience as Counterpoint to the Poetry of the Black Aesthetic: Negro American Literature Forum, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Winter, 1974), (St. Louis University Stable), p.289.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/> Accessed: 07/03/2010

9- Phillip Brian Harper, Nationalism and Social Division in Black Arts Poetry of the 1960s: Critical Inquiry, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Winter, 1993), (The University of Chicago Press Stable). p. 247

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/> Accessed: 07/03/2010

10- Harper, p. 235

11-Ibid., p. 238

12- Selwyn R. Cudjoe, One Way of Reading 'Somebody Blew Up America. (2002), p. 2. <http://www.trinicenter.com/2002>. Accessed: 01/03/2010.

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