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**COMMITMENT TO THE BLACK CAUSE: A STUDY OF AMIRI BARAKA'S PLAY  
*SLAVE SHIP* AS A HISTORICAL PAGEANT**

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**ABSTRACT**

The paper aims at establishing Amiri Baraka's *Slave Ship* as a historical pageant. It is a one-act play that takes place during distinct historical experiences in Afro-American history aboard a Slave Ship, during the Middle Passage from Africa to America, during a Plantation-era uprising, and during the era of the Civil Rights Movement. It represents the history of black people in America and incited its black audience to fight for social change. The play aims at raising the sociopolitical consciousness of the black audiences by depicting the black condition in America as a sequence of oppressive situations in which the black men are exploited and victimized. The paper discusses on *Slave Ship* as a Chronological play.

Amiri Baraka is one of the prominent and established literary figures who have been tremendously striving for establishing a black nation within the United States. Baraka has raised his strong and resonant voice as a poet, a dramatist, an essayist and an activist, protesting against the injustices and celebrating the blessings, and the triumphs of Afro-American life. He is a controversial writer who relentlessly fought for cultural nationalism. Baraka criticizes the whites and white oriented blacks. His approach is confined to violence, obscenity and hatred and his black militant theatre is the movement towards rejection, revolt and negation. Baraka remains a major aesthetic force in Afro-American drama. His play *Slave Ship* has been noted for its successful embodiment of the politics of Black Nationalism, the aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement, and the principals of 'Revolutionary Theater' put forth by Baraka in 1965.

*Slave Ship* is a historical pageant structured as a series of tableaux which traces the history of Afro-Americans. A Pageant is a public entertainment in which people dress in historical costumes and give performances of scenes from history. *Slave Ship* reenacts the sufferings of Black people in the hands of the white. Experimenting with ritual forms in his drama, Baraka

penned *Slave Ship*, a recreation of unrelieved horrors and desperate circumstances experienced by slaves during the first boarding of the ship from Africa to America. The use of music throughout the play is central to the theme of Afro-American cultural identity and communal harmony. Critics have noted the use of music in concurrence with audience participation in a communal dance to create a ritualistic drama through which theater is intended to inspire political action. The play has the greatest affinity with the Jazz avant-garde.

*Slave Ship: A Historical Pageant* (1967) is one of Baraka's most powerful plays. Although *Dutchman* is Baraka's most widely acclaimed play, a number of critics believe that *Slave Ship*, first performed in 1967, is his most significant one. On stage, the lower level of the setting is transformed from the filthy hold of a slave ship to the slave market and quarters of the contemporary slums. At the same time, the whites on the upper level of the stage change their roles accordingly from Ship Captain and Crew to Slave Dealer and Plantation Master and later to Modern Businessman. The play is full of filth, horror and degradation, created by an accumulation of physical stimuli that are meant to invade the senses of the actors and the audience alike. Finally, the play shows the triumphant victory of the Afro-Americans over the oppressive power.

Baraka's first tableau of *Slave Ship* opens in darkness. A variety of sounds and smells are emitted to the audience in order to represent the 'atmosfeeling' of life in the hold of a slave ship. The sounds include splashing of the sea, the boat rocking, as well as the sounds of the African drums, heavy chains, whips and guns, wailing of the enslaved Africans, and the sounds of the white slave traders. The smells are meant to create an atmosphere of 'life processes going on anyway,' and include 'urine' and 'excrement'. A light comes up on two white sailors chatting idly about the belongings to be had from the slave trade in America, above the 'drone of terror' from the hold below them. While the stage is still in almost complete darkness, the sounds of the enslaved Africans on the ship continue, and begin to include the sounds of humming, and chanting, as well as the voices of the suffering Africans, calling out to their Deity. The sailors above them laugh and point at the suffering Africans. From the ship's hold, one man cries out that a woman has killed her baby and herself. The sounds of another African woman being assaulted and raped by a white sailor are heard. The sounds of an African man struggling with the white man in defense of the raped African woman are also heard. Men are trying to calm the frightened women,

although they, too, are crying out to their Gods Shango, Obatala, and Orisha. The others weep and pray to their Gods for liberation and the souls of their dead companions. Throughout, the sounds of the African women humming can be heard almost continuously. The first reactions are the moans and the primal scream, as all the women scream 'the hideous scream.' We repetitively hear the imprisoned Africans calling their white Captors 'Devils'. The African drumming is interminable. The stage lighting emphasizes the juxtaposition of the joyful white sailors and the desperate black cargo.

The second section of the play takes place on a Southern plantation in America. A character referred to as 'The Old Tom,' is described as 'a shuffling 'Negro.' Scratching his head in a stereotypical fashion, he shuffles to the centre of the stage where he speaks to the white man: " I'm so happy. I jus don't know what to do" (255). He dances and shuffles in a show of self-deprecation, speaking subserviently to 'massa,' as the two White Men, dressed as Plantation Owners, continue laughing. A group of enslaved Afro-Americans plan a revolt to slit the master's throat in discussion with the Preacher, as the Old Tom looks on. The Old Tom then reports the planned revolt to the white slave masters in exchange for a couple of pork chops. The revolt is staged in darkness, the struggle indicated only by sounds. The rebellion is repressed and the whites are again laughing in triumph. Meanwhile, the black people have changed their names for English slave names, and are heard singing the spirituals and praying to Jesus. This emergence of Afro-American Identity, however, does not negate their African origin as they continue to pray to African Gods, "Obatala . . . Shango . . . Lord of the forests," (256) to get their strength back.

In the third section, the play moves into a more recent period in history and we see Tom, who is the same Tom as before, now dressed as a preacher in a modern business suit, referred to as the New Tom, gives a speech, intended to soothe the white men, advocating integration and promises to be non-violent: "We Kneegrows are ready to integrate" (257) A man approaches the Preacher and lays the bloody corpse of a baby at his feet. As the Preacher continues his speech, which turns into jabbering nonsense, he attempts to kick the corpse behind him. The disgusting vision of humiliating some members of the black society is dispelled by the resisting will of the other blacks. Out of dissonance of the sounds of the *Slave Ship*, saxophone and drums, there arises a chant as:

Rise, Rise, Rise,  
Cut these ties, Black Man Rise  
We gon' be the thing we are .....  
When we gonna rise up, brother  
When we gonna rise above the sun  
I mean, when we gonna lift ur hands and voices  
When we gonna show the world who we really are  
When we gonna rise up, brother  
When we gonna take our own place, brother  
Like the world had just begun. (258)

The chant strengthens and culminates. The Preacher is afraid of the rising rhythmic black masses, and the music and dance make him aware of his approaching destiny. He begs the white man for protection.

PREACHER: Please, boss, these nigger goin' crazy; please, boss, throw you' lightin' at 'em, white jesus boss, white light god, they goin crazy! Help... Please, boss, please ..... I do anything for you. (259)

We hear the voice of the white man laughing at the sight of the Preacher. The slavish, frightened preacher is encircled by the blacks. They slaughter him and go in search of the white voice. The white voice at first laughs at their intentions and then, upon realizing that the blacks are serious, changes to a plea.

VOICE: you haha can't touch me . . . you scared of me, niggers. I'm God. You cain't kill white Jesus God. I got long blond blowhair, I don't even need to wear a wig. You love the way I look. You want to look like me. You love me. You want me. Please. I'm good. I'm kind I'll give you anything you want. I'm white Jesus savior right god pay you money nigger me is good god be please . . . don't. (259)

The audience hears the wretched scream of the white voice as it is killed by the empowered, freedom seeking blacks in the revolt. The lyrics are repeated. During the singing, black bodies continue to rise from the floor. The arisen blacks form a dance line. The Afro-American charac-

ters, as a group, begin to dance to modern jazz music. The stage directions indicate that the cast is to invite members of the audience to dance, creating a 'party' atmosphere. Amidst this festive, ritualized dancing, which indicates a celebration of successful revolt, the severed head of the Preacher is thrown into the center of the dancers. After a pause, the dancing resumes even more enthusiastically. The stage then goes black. The play concludes at the high point of arousal of the audience when the boundary between the dramatic and the social text is anticipated as crumbling.

The shift from 'people on stage' to 'actual party,' from the theatrical event to the social context is central to the intent of this play. It seeks to close the gap between the 'art' and 'the life' of African American people in the context of contemporary social action, and also use it as a means of reclaiming a mythic past by the ritualistic act of sacrifice. The end gestures towards a fusion of the revolutionary and the ritualistic goals of Baraka's theatre. The cycle of history will be broken only when the divide between the audience and actors is removed, and the insights of the play are carried over to the community. In his essay, '*Revolutionary Theatre*' Baraka says,

what we show must cause the blood to rush, so that pre-revolutionary temperaments will be bathed in this bold, and it will cause their deepest souls to move, and they find themselves tensed and clenched, even ready to die at what the soul has been taught. (213)

The climax deals with the emotion that has been generated through the course of the play. The emotions are not to be purged, but sustained for generating change:

We will scream and cry, murder, run through the streets in agony, if it means some soul will be moved, moved to actual understanding of what the world is, and what it ought to be. (213)

In *Slave ship*, the audiences are expected to participate in the collectivity of the ritualistic dance at the end. This transference of the action from the dramatic to the social world emphasizes the communal nature of the action envisaged. The celebration at the end takes us back to the origins of drama in sacrificial rituals. The sacrifices of the black preacher and the white voice are seen as pacifying, which start the healing process for the black community.

*Slave Ship* generates intense reactions from the audience. *Slave ship's* Director, Gilbert Moses, claimed in an interview with Harry Elam that in some southern cities, black votes registration increased immediately after the performance of the play. Although Elam hesitated to draw too close a link between the play and political activism, he believed that the audience's participation in the play was in itself a form of political engagement. The intensity of the play was amplified by Moses' clever use of the entire theater as a stage, enabling the action to take place next to where someone was seated or even behind him. By shortening the distance between the performers and the audience, the audience were invited, if not forced, into an emotional engagement with the horrors depicted in the play. At one performance at the Chelsea, slaves were auctioned to members of the audience. Harry J. Elam, Jr. noted:

At one performance of *Slave ship* in Batin Rouge, Louisiana, an aroused audience bolstered by the militant participatory action of the production stood at the end of the performance ready to riot. If not for the fact that the doors of the theater remained bolted until the fervor had subsided somewhat, this audience certainly would have acted on its resolve. At another performance . . . in west point, Mississippi, the entire audience rose to its feet and joined with the actors, waving fists and chanting, "we gonna rise up!(13)

Kimberley Benston says that it is with *Slave Ship*, that Baraka elevates music to the dual position of central metaphor and primary theatrical vehicle. The script of the play *Slave Ship* is extremely short, only twelve pages. Within the extremely brief script, detailed stage directions overwhelm the dialogue, and the majority of the directions involve sound making, but it is seldom specified who is to be making these sounds. The traditional theatrical communication through the sense of sight is here replaced by an aural mnemopoetics meant to bring about a revival of history through scattered sounds. This dramaturgical phonomnesia, sounding as it does the depths of the Afro-Atlantic memory, is central to the 'historical pageant' that one experiences as "a continuous rush of sound, groans, screams and souls wailing for freedom and relief from suffering"( *Black Arts*,269). *Slave Ship's* mnemopoetics of slavery is thus revealed as an exorcistic ritual that brings into the play a pervasive phonomnesia, (i.e., a member of original sounds recaptured in their 'absolute pain' and visceral 'terror').

*Slave Ship* is visualized as an event, a performance which creates an enveloping effect using light and darkness, sounds and smells, speech and silence. Speech and Words are not privileged over the other sensory theatrical elements, and often used as mere sounds. Sound is employed in a multiplicity of ways, including chants, screams, laughter, crying, sounds of the sea, sounds of the moving ship, gun shots, rattle of chains, whip sounds, drums, rattles, tambourines, music and singing. There are smell effects of debris, urine, human excretion and that of the Sea. Tactile effects of blow of the whip, dragging of chains, of people pushed together, are created through sounds and variation of light and darkness. All these elements together create a pervasive and oppressive effect, or what Baraka calls 'a total atmosfeeling,' which is meant to envelop the audience as much as the actors.

The play uses extensive and graphic stage directions to create the sensory experience for the readers. The characters include three men and three women ( without names ), who play the role of African Slaves; Tom, who is first the slave and then the preacher; White Captain and White Sailor, who transform into Plantation Owners; and Dancers, Musicians and Children. The Opening scene creates the heavy, oppressive atmosphere of the Slave Ship. In the first line of the play, a reference to the ship full of captured Africans as a 'cargo of black gold' establishes their status as dehumanized commodities. However, the objectification of these people is offset by the audience being surrounded, in darkness and dim lights, by the sounds and smells of their agony and suffering. Men cry out to their gods; children scream, and women wail. The incessant moaning of the slave women beacons the symbolic representation of the life of the black people, while the whites are defined by their hideous laughter. White men in sailor suits point at the scene of human degradation before them and laugh and roll in merriment. The first Tableau of this pageant thus establishes the pain, terror and the confusion of men, women and children when they find themselves brutally herded into the slave ship. While there is continuity with the African past in the old Yoruba dances and in the drums of ancient African warriors, debasement and betrayal of the community has already begun with some of the slaves shuffling and dancing. The white sailors have, with a change of the hat, transformed into the plantation owners and they continue to laugh.

Shaking his head up and down, agreeing with massa, agreeing, and agreeing, while the whips snap. Lights off, flash on and the Sailors, with hats changed to show them as Plantation owners are still laughing; (255)

*Slave ship* continues to strike the reader with its variety of experimental stylistic and technical elements as a dramatic work. Experimental dramatic technique in this play includes a rich texture of overlapping sounds as well as smells and audience participation. *Slave ship* is neither plot driven nor character oriented, nor dialogue-centred; much of the written play consists of stage directions. The stylistic elements of Baraka's written stage directions are extremely expressive and sound. In addition, Baraka makes use of nonverbal phonetic indications of musical sounds, as well as made-up words, and expressive phrases that indicate the 'atmosfeeling' of a particular scene, rather than concrete directions indicating action in his stage directions.

The play is organized into historical epochs and the acts and scenes are differentiated by lights dimming over singing or chanting. It is difficult to distill the play into a brief plot analysis because Baraka draws on so many cultural references throughout, that the play relies on a kind of vernacular expressionism, or the recognition of particular image of the ship. Kimberly Benston says, "Baraka (Moses) transforms the entire theater into the Slave Ship whose black passengers historical journey is from first enslavement to contemporary revolution, and whose mythical journey is from African Civilisation through enslavement to spiritual residency" (77). By maintaining the Slave Ship as a setting for the play's action, Moses connected African American experiences of the past and the present. Through this visual representation, Moses wanted the spectators to understand that African American existence in America remained slave like, devoid of a sense of belonging or ownership. Slave Ship is a critical site of black degradation and collective social memory. As a chronological spot of morally unacceptable racial violence, the Slave Ship is potent enough to communicate to its spectators an Afro-American heritage of struggle and survival.

In the New York Times, "Drama Mailbag" of December 14, 1969, a letter to the editor, Samuel Friedland writes,

at the Chelsea Theater center right now... theater is powerfully happening right now as a unique experience. He continues to describe his 'experience' of

LeRoi Jones' one act play *Slaves Ship*, to which he brought his class of college English majors, as a powerfully engaging one. He tells the paper, "Toward the end of the play, during the "When we gonna rise..." refrain, many of my young black students were on their feet, swaying and clapping to the beat, totally involved." He continues, "For whites and blacks the black experience is telescoped and unfolded from its early agonies to its present pride.

Baraka engrosses *Slave Ship's* audiences towards active political participation. As Benston interprets it, the cannibalistic rite at the end is apocalyptic, completing the 'absorption of the natural historical cycle into mythology' and thus bringing the original sense of wholeness and identity to the community (254). In spite of Benston's neat explanation, the end, however, remains disturbing and ambiguous. The closing stage direction of the play reads as follows:

when the party reaches some loose improvisation, et cetera, audience relaxed, somebody throws the preacher's head into center of floor, that is after dancing starts for real. Then Black. (145)

The conclusion of the play envisions a triumphant end to the tragic journey, as the people sing ' Rise, Rise, Rise,' and after killing both White Voice and Black Preacher, engage in a triumphant dance. The end remains problematic because it enacts a transition from tragic action into revolutionary action. The last scene of the play, in which the audiences are asked to participate, brings into focus several issues central to the structure of the play. In a way, the play is open-ended since its conclusion remains consequent upon audience participation in the sacrificial ritual. After the preacher has been killed, the stage direction reads:

Lights come up abruptly, and people on stage begin to dance. . . Enter audience; get members of audience to dance. To same music. Rise Up. Turns into an actual party. (259)

The participation of the audience in the dance at the end suggests an interface between the theatrical event and social reality. The end thus remains an 'event' poised between lived experience and symbolic representation.

Baraka explains his choice of including a play of his earlier Black Art period in the Introduction, by evoking the revolutionary spirit that pervades it:

*Slave ship* was written just before the Newark rebellion [1967 riot], and its impending explosion is the heat you feel. It is flatly nationalist and anti-white [...]. *Slave ship* is a pageant, like my grandmother had in Bethany Baptist church, with the old ladies dressed up in white sheets, telling the stories of Bible times. But this pageant is more a scenario, a note of rage to be expanded, so that the bitterness becomes an environment in which we can all learn to be ourselves, now [...]. If we can bring back on ourselves, the absolute pain our people must have felt when they came to this shore, we are more ourselves again, and begin to put history back in our menu, and forget the propaganda of devils that they are not devils. (*Motion of History and Other Plays*)

*Slave ship* represents the high point of Baraka's commitment to Artaud's theatre of cruelty. According to Leslie Senders,

*Slave ship* embodies the quintessential theater-of-cruelty experience, for it creates its audience not only the experience of the horror of the middle passage and the black life in America but also an energy that gathers strength in the course of the play to emerge as celebration in the end.(171)

Baraka's intentions were different from Artaud's desire to purge the audience of the desire to act violently. Instead, Baraka believed that by heightening emotional confrontations through drama, he was helping to create and sustain political activism on the part of the blacks in his audience.

The consideration of the play as a 'historical pageant' suggests the performative enactment of a 'nation in progress,' a combination of the traditional ritual of official glorification of a nation's history and its unification through communal participation. Baraka's play utilizes the representation of Afro-American history as a means of forging a communal African-American identity through the preservation of African cultural roots. *Slaveship* functions as a dramatisation of Black nationhood that purports to summon a newly imagined nation through the restoration, even the revision of the past. Historical time is thus fragmented and recombined through a new

association of images and stereotypes as a way of underlying the continuity of racial oppression. The play reproduces residual practices of resistance from the African warrior or the infanticide slave woman to the rebellious field slave, in order to induce a regained contestatory behavior.

*Slave ship* is one of the Baraka's greatest accomplishments. As a pageant, it not only restores the past in a symbolic and reflexive performance, but also offers a transformative vision of the past in the configuration of models of resistance that provide the basis for the new national construct. The Middle Passage, New World Slavery and the Violence of Segregation are marked as breaches in the development of the Afro-American Community. It is through the luminal character of the pageant that these breaches become the bridges that reconnect the fragments of history to re-assemble the 'Black Nation'. *Slave Ship* represents the history of black people in America and incited its black audience to fight for social change. In the opinion of Kimberly Benston, "Music is thus the strength, memory, power, triumph, affirmation--the entire historical and mythical process of Afro- American being."(181) Through a synthesis of drama, music, and sound, Jones created a dramatic form clearly rooted in the black experience that aided in the creation of powerful ritualistic experience for audience and performers. The play *Slave ship* is not an entertainment in the ordinary sense of the word, because it aims at creating awareness among people. It doesn't give joy to the people. It is an edutainment, for it portrays the collective efforts of the black community to overthrow the whites by employing the features of the performance art through theatre.

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