

Unjust Oppression and Social Unrest in Amiri Baraka's Select Plays

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Courtesy: <http://www.amiribaraka.com/>

Literature is an imitation of human action and often presents a picture of what people think, say and do in the society. Literature is not only a reflection of the society but also serves as a corrective mirror in which members of the society can look at themselves and find the need for positive change. There are relations and interrelation between men who live in the society. The subject matter of literature is society in some form or the other. Human society is characterized by the patterns of relationship between individuals who share cultures, traditions, beliefs and values, etc. African American literature dealt with the social, literary, historical,

political and economic conditions of the Black people. The writers attempted to define Black identity and Black humanity in the unjust society of America.

Black literature is synonymous with literature of protest. They protest against exploitation, limitations, restrictions, discrimination, intolerance and inequality to which they are subjected by the Whites in the United States. The cruel, repressive and brutal factors in American life which the African American writers have recorded and transformed into art have created a literary tradition of their own. African Americans also resisted and protested against racial segregation and discrimination. Within the framework of Black Arts Movement, a Black artist is expected to create a relationship between his art and the Black community. In a way, he has the responsibility to project, through his writings, the miseries and oppressions heaped upon his people.

The Civil Rights and Black Power Movement created a powerful impression on Black voices in the 60s. Amiri Baraka is one of the important and effective figures and leaders of the Black Arts Movement. He was very famous in this movement as a poet, a musician and especially as a playwright. A seminal figure in the contemporary black literature, Amiri Baraka is the most controversial, the most militant, the most revolutionary, and the most explosive black playwright. Baraka is generally regarded as the leading black playwright of the decade (1964 - 1974) not only because his plays were often produced Off-Broadway and in other theatres but also exploded like bombs on the American stages. He uses his writings to explore the experience and anger of the marginalized African American people against racism.

The life of African American had always been relentlessly unreal and their problems remain unsolved. This concept is reflected in his plays. The modern myth of black assimilation has been practiced by many of the black middle class in America. It consists of adopting the values and norms of the oppressing society through white education. The survival of the Blackman in America is predicated upon his ability to keep his thoughts and his true identity hidden. Amiri Baraka, a contemporary playwright, poet, essayist, novelist and critic has explored it extensively. His plays demonstrated the possibility of change through force and determination. Some of Baraka's plays initially deviate from a ritualistic pattern, but they end with ritual murders, thereby preserving the efficacy of ritual sacrifice. The following are among his most salient plays that fall within this category: *Dutchman*, *The Toilet*, and *The Slave*. In general, Baraka's style, aims, and themes set a violent, autonomous, and defiant tone for Black drama of the 1960s.

Although Baraka has written a number of plays, *Dutchman* is widely considered his masterpiece. The play has received the Obie Award for the best off-Broadway play and brought Baraka to the attention of the American public. *Dutchman* is a sharply focused indictment of those African Americans who desire to assimilate into mainstream American society. In doing so, these individuals deny all vestiges of racial past and make every effort to distance themselves from the reality of black existence in America. The play is an attack on the Negro, Clay, who instead of affirming his negritude and revolting against the culture and values of a white bourgeois society, suppresses his rage and adopts the dress, speech, manners, and even the literary aesthetics of that society.

The Slave, one act play by Baraka, performed and published in 1964. It examines the tension between blacks and whites in contemporary America. The play addresses the ways in which violence affects the lives of ordinary African American men and women and in which a fundamental racism in American society renders these individuals vulnerable to violence. *The Slave* is the story of a visit by African American Walker Vessels, to the home of his white ex-wife Grace, and Easley, her white husband. Baraka points up the black man's low status in American society but also stresses that he is victimized and enslaved by his own hatred and is thus unable to effect social changes.

Set in a high school lavatory in the early 1960s, the first production of Baraka's *The Toilet* explored Black life, love, and social order. As a piece of Revolutionary theatre, the play also suggested that before Blacks and whites could come together, they would inevitably come to blows first. *The Toilet* presented Ray Foots, the main character, coming of age while struggling to come to terms with being both Black and homosexual. *The Toilet* is about the lives of black people and about a boy's inability (because he is the victim) to explain that he is something stranger than the rest, even though the blood and soul of him is theirs.

The article thus analyses Amir Baraka's concerns such as racial tension and conflict, and the necessity for social change through revolutionary means. He advocated socialism as a viable solution to the problems in America resulting in goodwill and harmony. By exposing the horror of race relations in America, Baraka diagnoses the problem of white dominance in American society and prescribes his cure – race revolution and murder.

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