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BUILDING UP OF BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS THROUGH THE 'BLACK THEATRE'

Dr. PRADNYA S. YENKAR

Associate Professor, Department of English,
Vidyabharati Mahavidyalaya, Amravati (M.S.)-444602 India
pradnyayenkar@gmail.com
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Dr. PRADNYA S. YENKAR

ABSTRACT

Black writers have played a significant role in the development of American Literature, since last two and half centuries. Their writings ranged from the early slave narratives depicting the cruelty and pain of slavery to the modern writings which deals with the lingering effects of slavery- racism and apartheid. These plays have depicted a world where human values seem to have no relevance. The black writers gave American literature a new direction. These writers did this with missionary zeal. This was because the earlier black writers sought to demonstrate the fact that all black Americans be extended the same human rights as those which were claimed by the white Americans. In the beginning of the early Nineteenth century most of the writing is in the form of slave narratives. These narratives written between 1830-1861 established themselves as the black texts. These narratives helped to bring about a great change in the attitude of society towards black. Slave narratives were ideological and emotional reflections of the great majority of the black people. Till 1920's, the Black in American drama is irrelevant as a serious character. From 1920's to 1940's there is change. The Black becomes increasingly human, though his humanity is limited from the present point of view and Black plays appear in which the Black's plight is portrayed against or an appeal to white people.

This paper throws light on the contribution of 'Black Theatre' in the service of black community which aimed at the building up of black consciousness. Few dramas in this period are also briefly discussed which shows the progress or at least the kind of inner changes that took place and served as a cross-section which provides clues to the rest.

Keywords: Black Movement, Black Theatre, Black Literature, Black Consciousness

I. Introduction

One cannot study the Black drama and theatre without increasing awareness of and even involvement in the struggle of the Black people. These dramas are direct expressions of that struggle. Their special characteristics at various times depend on what happens within the struggle in some particular phase of it. Some Black plays can be adequately appreciated only in relation to the Black Civil Rights Movement, in its

various ideological manifestations, and not independently as a purely literary phenomenon. The study of Negro drama and theatre enhance the understanding of Black people and their problems. As drama and theatre, it stands on its own feet, though it takes its stand right at the centre of the Black community's problems. Negro writing should be viewed fully and comprehensively. Otherwise it may appear rather diminished in the larger world of American literature. Black drama may seem a small and almost insignificant part of American drama unless it is analysed as a total art of the theatre and a living social institution.

The American drama has been contributing significantly from 1762 i.e. more than two and half centuries. It is necessary to trace this issue from a domestic American point of view and to bring out its specifically American qualities. American drama reveals her social and political history, the manners and morals of America over two and half century. Even at its lowest ebb, American drama reflected some elements of American culture. This includes the convention of treating the Black as a figure of fun or pity. O'Neill (1920) is the first in *Emperor Jones* and *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, to make the Blacks 'the protagonist of a drama free of these humiliating stereotypes'¹

II. White Expectation and Black Acquiescence in 'Mulatto'

The drama 'Mulatto' is the portrait of a southern plantation owner, Colonel Norwood, his brown mistress Cora and their children of varying shades dark to ivory-yellow to almost white. The youngest, Robert, is in revolt against the way of life established by Col. Norwood and accepted by his wife, the other children and the community symbolised by the figure of Fred Higgins. Speaking to his daughter, Col. Norwood says. '*Do they teach you in that school to have good manners, and not be afraid of work and to respect white folks?*' The daughter replies, '*yes, sir, I have been taking up cooking and sewing too*'.²

This question and answer sum up the white expectation and the black acquiescence in it of the contemporary social circumstances. Col. Norwood's daughter wants to teach in the local school but he brutally denies her permission to do so. Robert's revolt after many confrontations ends with his killing his white father, a symbolic act which anticipates later attitudes. The mob tries to lynch him, and he commits suicide. Before he does, his brown mother, the mistress of col. Norwood's eyes are opened to the realities of the situation: symbolically, the opening of the eyes of all Blacks allied to Whites in an accepted subordinate position.

III. Note of Hope in 'A Raisin in the Sun'

A Raisin in the Sun is full of conflicts: generational conflicts, gender conflicts, ideological conflicts, and perhaps most important, conflicts of dreams, which are at the centre of the play. These unfulfilled dreams are the source of the various problems in the play. The manner in which Hansberry presents these problems and the skill with which she weaves them into the basic theme of the work attest the artistry of the playwright. By placing three generations in the same cramped quarters, Hansberry focuses dramatically on some of the essential differences between age and youth. She deals with many issues of race, gender, family values, religion, and ethics. The play poses many more problems than it resolves or even attempts to resolve; therein lies the complexity and the realism of the drama. It also deals with two problems: the discords of a family with high hopes, and the social injustice of segregation. One aspect of this play is the way in which Hansberry explores the various responses and attitudes amongst the black community to their situation at the time and in particular their identity³.

This drama depicted a besieged Black family attempting to find a better house to live in. The house is found but it's in a White neighbourhood and one of its representatives tries to buy them off. After many vicissitudes, comes the act of defiance which ends the play on a note of Hope. This note is unacceptable to latter Black playwrights.⁴

IV. Argument of a Black in 'The Slave'

There are three characters brought together in the play, '*The slave*'. A Black leader Walker Vessels, his former white wife Grace, and her second husband Bradford Easley, a white liberal. Explosions in the streets occur as the play goes on. Vessels breaks into the house and needles Easley and Grace till they murder him.

Grace calls him a nigger. He abuses them in the foulest language and is contemptuous of all their pretensions and interests. He says 'There's probably nothing I can say to make you understand me.... now'. When Easley threatens to throw him out, he retorts: 'Yeah, yeah I know. That's your job. A liberal education and a long history of concern for minorities and charitable organizations can do that for you.' Vessels claims his children from Grace and Easley, but they die as the house collapses over them. The Black's argument with his former wife and her second husband-the white liberal is not just reasonable but revolutionary as a result of despair. 'The point is that you had your chance, darling, now these other folks have theirs,' the Black says, a theme which recurs in later Black drama. The white liberal's response to it is: 'God, what an ugly idea.'⁵

Black's argument is not merely propagandist but tragic because it projects a true social despair. The basic criticism of Grace and Easley by the Black Walker Vessels is difficult for non- Blacks to accept but that is precisely what gives it its cogency. The violence, the sickness, the foul language, the hatred and the failure of communication between Whites and Blacks are all true reflections of social reality.

V. A Violent White Woman in 'Dutchman'

'*Dutchman*' is an angry play that addresses American racial and sexual stereotypes, but it is not as consciously a Black Nationalist call to action as is the work Baraka produced after 1965. Many of the plays that Baraka wrote during the decade following the publication of 'Dutchman' have been declared by critics as ephemeral agitation-propaganda pieces. All of them address the issues of race in America in a more directly didactic manner than 'Dutchman'. 'Dutchman' earned for Baraka an Obie Award as the best Off-Broadway play of 1964 and won for him a national reputation as a leading black dramatist. It continues to be Baraka's most frequently discussed work. The play is a product of Baraka's pre- revolutionary period, a period in which he wrote 'The Slave'(1964), The Baptism (1964), and The Toilet (1964) under the name Le Roi Jones.

In this play by Jones 'The Dutchman', there is the same sickness, violence, obscenity and hatred. The only difference is that the Black in it gets killed because he failed to act in time. Jones' point seems to be that the Black should have killed first. The violent White woman who kills him represents all the neurotic conflicts of modern society, and there is nothing constructive that the Black can do with these conflicts except destroy them. Being emasculated by White society, the Negro in the play has only enough strength to slap the White woman when she provokes him and the days of mere slapping are over.⁶

There are no Dutchmen on the stage. The setting of the play is a New York City subway. Its characters are a White American woman and a Black American man. Why has the author given the play so apparently irrelevant a title? The question has received a number of answers in the extensive body of criticism the play has inspired, but perhaps most useful is the suggestion that the title alludes to the legend of the Flying Dutchman, doomed to sail the seas forever, with no hope of release from the curse of endless repetition. The relevance of this legend to the play is shown both by the parallel of ship's voyage and subway's journey. Most critics see the ending of the play as if the play has enacted is about to begin again. That process culminated in the death of Clay. The challenge of the play, then, is to arrive at some understanding of several questions: What killed Clay? Why the process is repeated endlessly? Is there any hope of liberation from the repetition, of release from the curse?

It is clear that Lula is the active force in Clay's destruction. She is, at a mythic level, a seductress, an Eve figure who has already eaten the apple and now offers it to Clay. Her sexual aggressiveness also has implications in the context of social realism, one of the levels at which the play operates. For a young, unattached man of Clay's generation, a generation for whom the man was the "normal" sexual aggressor, failure to respond to the openly sexual overtures of an attractive woman would raise questions about his manhood. Thus, Clay affirms that he would be a fool not to want to get involved with a beautiful woman like Lula—precisely the manly response expected of him. The situation becomes potentially more explosive, even if thereby more exciting, because Lula is a white woman, apparently offering herself sexually to a black man. The audience comes to understand that Clay's race has not been a neutral factor in Lula's decision to make him her target.

VI. Addressing White Audiences

The new Black playwrights write for Black audiences which they have to create by the way in which they write and the political positions they take up. The white drama and the theatre, particularly their avant garde manifestations, no longer provide the norms. 'Most of these movements are irrelevant to Black Theatre. Some of them are considered as 'decadent', others as 'oppressive.'⁷ 'Amen Corner'⁸ and 'Blues for Mister Charlie'⁹ are the plays of protest, of anger, of documentation and of propaganda, more or less successful in their attempt to make white audiences feel ashamed and guilty. Even when white critics find fault with these plays for their literary and dramatic clumsiness and their historical distortions, they approve of their humanist spirit and of the author's values.

The Amen Corner, written in the 1950s, was first enacted on the campus of Howard University, then in Los Angeles, before opening on Broadway in 1965. It won the 1964 Foreign Drama Critics Circle Award. The play was not published in book form until 1968. Several critics have noted the play's embodiment of aesthetic values put forth by the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. Darwin T. Turner explains that 'The 'Amen Corner' seems more clearly designed as a drama written about black experience for a black audience. In this respect, it resembles Black Arts drama, in which the dramatist presumes that he must write without concern for the white spectator, who exists outside the black experience and without comprehension of it.' James Baldwin wrote 'Blues for Mister Charlie' primarily to educate white audiences concerning the plight of African Americans. 'Blues for Mister Charlie' was written during one of the most turbulent periods in the racial history of the United States. After nearly three hundred years of protest and a century after the Emancipation Proclamation, most African Americans still found themselves without the same civil rights and standard of living enjoyed by white Americans. In the early 1960's, the nation experienced thousands of demonstrations against discrimination in employment, education, housing, and the use of public facilities. White racists injured and murdered African Americans and their white sympathizers. Militant segregationists did not exempt black children or churches from their wrath. The drama was inspired by a real murder, in 1955, of a fourteen-year-old black Chicagoan named Emmett Till. While visiting relatives in a small town in Mississippi, Emmett allegedly flirted with a married white woman. Two white men kidnapped and murdered the youth, and an all-white jury acquitted the men, who later confessed to the crime with no remorse. 'Blues for Mister Charlie' illustrates graphically how racism obstructs justice, as evidenced by the case of Emmett Till.

VII. Conclusion

The Black theatre directly serves the intellectual, emotional, political and spiritual needs of the Black community. The Black Arts Movement, also referred to as the Black Aesthetic Movement flourished during the 1960s and 70s, and embodied values derived from Black Nationalism and promoted politically and socially significant works, often written in Black English vernacular. Important writers of the Black Arts Movement also include Eldridge Cleaver, Angela Davis, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison. While reading the three Black plays i.e. Langston Hughes's 'Mulatto', Lorraine Hansberry's 'A Raisin in the Sun' and Le Roi Jones's 'The Slave' we start with one kind of horror and end with an altogether different kind. In Langston Hughes's play we get the full impact of a message; The racial situation in America is horrible. Whereas the play by Lorraine Hansberry, 'A Raisin in the Sun' gives the message to mean: American society has built a trap for the Black which creates intolerable tensions and frustrations. But there is an escape from the trap by acts of courage and defiance in the third play Le Roi Jones's 'The Slave'. Its message is distorted beyond hope and spells out without compromising the words: 'I hate you. We shall destroy you. Destruction has already begun. It must go on relentlessly. There is no way out'. The plays 'Amen Corner' and 'Blues for Mr. Charlie' belong to an older tradition to the extent that Baldwin is primarily a Black spokesman addressing White audiences.

Le Roi Jones had proposed the following as an integral part of a Black Theatre Movement in the service of the Black Community: Newsletters, Cartoons, Illustrated Newspapers, Leaflets, Comic Books, Posters, Agitation, Poetry readings, Concerts, Art Exhibitions, Lectures, Films, Documentaries, Photography, Magazines, Dances, Books, Skits, Improvisations, Street Corner Meetings and Readings. All these aimed at the building up of Black Consciousness.

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