



REVOLUTIONARY IMPULSE IN LEROI JONES' *DUTCHMAN AND THE SLAVE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is on LeRoi Jones (now, Imama Amiri Baraka) two plays, Dutchman and The Slave – two Afro-American texts that centre on racial war between Whites and Blacks in America. In both plays, there is the urge to revolutionized,

the resultant effect of the socio-political cum economic apathy prevalent in that same society. In Dutchman, The White race wins, while the Black race wins in The Slave. The exposition apart, this paper, aims at the literary discuss of the

INTRODUCTION

The author of the plays *Dutchman and The Slave* was one of the foremost and leading cultural spokesmen for the blacks in America, from the period of the 1960s onward. He subsequently changed his name to Imama Amiri Baraka and ever then, has been writing in that name.

philosophy behind the Black-dreams and LeRoi Jones' conviction that the most basic of all human rights, is the right to self-defence, as portrayed by his ardent character, Walker.

DUTCHMAN AND THE SLAVE-AN EXPOSITION

These two texts are published as a volume. The plays, though works of distinct natures, create a high sense as a single piece, and as such offer

striking parallelisms in character portrayal, background and thematic preoccupations. The themes of search and of sanity which are the results of the revolutionary impulse in the major characters, attain relevance in the negro-white conflicts. As literary masterpieces, *Dutchman* and *The Slave* are literally imbued with philosophical ideas as envisaged in the language – that of serious anger to annihilate or euthanize the age-long racial imbroglio between blacks and whites in America. In short, the two plays “illuminate as with a flash of lightening a deadly serious problem, [thus] bringing an eloquent and exceptionally powerful voice to the American theatre”¹. In other words, both plays portray complicated socio-political conflicts in Negro-White relationship, the pogrom as hatched by the whites against the blacks and the blacks persistent resistance against white oppression. They are the reviews of the Negroman’s feelings towards the American counterparts who are whites and the whites towards the blacks, both whom live in the same American society but in distinct suburbs or regions. These two significant Black-American texts depict the notions of Black revolutionary impulse and blacks continuous quest for perpetual freedom, both in America and elsewhere that man is engulfed in a range of perpetual racial-wars.

Dutchman as a play is set in a New York subway train and concerns the actual confrontation between a well educated young Negro-man, Clay and a White-woman, Lula. This conflict which follows emanates from the sexual provocation of the Negro-man by the White woman. This conflict though sexually provoked, has a deeper understanding in the issue of racism that embodies that of colour and class consciousness between the Blacks and Whites in America. The continued insistence and prickling verbal abuses and disgrace lead to physical assault and the violence of the revolutionary impulse as depicted in the insulting language of the leading characters, culminating in the attainment of a harsh, brutal and disastrous end in favour of the White woman who stabbed Clay to death. This murder is because of Clay’s refusal to come to a definite and concrete compromise with her and the effect can be seen in the harshness of her language:

Sorry is right

Sorry is the rightest thing you’ve said. Get this man off me! Hurry now!

Open the door and throw his body out.

And all of you get off at the next stop. (Dutchman, P.37).

In *The Slave*, Leroi Jones depicts the Negro-White conflict in the characters of Walker Vessels who represents the Black race and that of his ex-wife, Grace and her current husband, Easley, representing the White community and their unchanging conservatism towards and over the Black race. Walker, in a typical Black manner accuses his ex-wife of insincerity towards him on his quest for revolutionary black soldiers that will usher victory for the entire black race, especially the Blackman in America. He claims ownership of the two girls, Catherine and Elizabeth, and scornfully taunts Bradford Easley of impotency and irresponsibility as a man.

In the conflict that ensued, Walker in shattering rage and murderous fury, kindled by the impulse to revolt, shoots and kills his antagonist, Bradford, and his black soldiers artillery barrage kills the woman of his dream and even the two girls he claims to father. It is a tragedy that he, in the bid to destroy all that is white, eventually destroyed himself, his two children and a "supposed" wife.

All through the plays, one can depict the consistently consistent desire or the overriding impulsiveness in the black characters to seeing that the orders of things changed, in the Black-American society. There is that strong-will and self-determinism, right from Clay in *Dutchman* to Walker in *The Slave* to making sure the Whiteman stops his overbearing posture over the Blackman.

REVOLUTIONARY IMPULSE IN DUTCHMAN AND THE SLAVE

The revolutionary impulse in these plays hinges on the themes of search and sanity that integrate to direct the course of actions. This revolutionary impulse is the result of many factors: personal, natural, racial, social, economical and political. Whatever the characters thought do is inbred from this impulse to reshape the society and purge it of all unhealthy relationship. The plays concern a racial war. In *Dutchman*, the White race wins, while in *The Slave*, the Black race in the person of Walker wins and everything comes to normalcy, as the urge to revolutionize has been fulfilled. The winners of these wars are a woman and a man, who as sexual opposite to one another, represent and symbolize opposed cultural ideologies and commitments. In Frantz Fanon's view, the loser, Clay, a Black in *Dutchman*, is a supposedly revolutionist in all ramifications, but

preferred being an artist intellectual modelled as a White and hatching out his roles with ease.² He is not fully developed though has that innate spirit and a desire to see things change for the better in the American society. He is immature and dies tragically unsophisticated, hence he loses all sympathy from the readers. In *The Slave*, the victor, though an artist intellectual, refutes all ideals that characterized the White race, and opts for violent protests. This choice has demonstrated [the fact] that the most notable winners [must] encounter heartbreaking obstacles before they triumphed [and] they won because they refused to [compromise or] become discouraged by their defeats³. He is the direct opposite of the former, fully matured as the height he attains leads to what Aristotle in *The Poetics* calls, “purgation” or “catharsis”⁴.

It is a natural traits of the Whites to claim superiority over the Blacks while the Blacks in turn, opposed to this self assumption, assert their positions through disobedience, civil unrest and sometimes, an outright revolution against the egocentric Whites. This revolutionary desire, consciously and unconsciously influenced the behavioral patterns of the characters in these two plays.

The victorious white woman in *Dutchman* tries to impulse her cultural values on the Blackman victim, Clay. The victor in *The Slave*, the protagonist, walker, stubbornly loves his new found philosophy and ideological orientation from his black revolutionary army over his wife, Grace. At first, Lula entices Clay into sexual promiscuity but later denies him this rare chance. This is the resultant factor that leads him into brutalizing the white woman, beating of the drunkard and his catastrophic demise in the hands of the deceitful Lula. He had at first imagined himself in a state of great ecstasy with the woman, only to be disappointed at the last stage. This affects his psychic being and the eventual claim by Lula of insanity in Clay.

Walker as a revolutionist sees Bradford as impotent and incapable of procreation and for this reason, he taunts him to a spiritual death. He also sees his “former” wife as being untruthful to him by her marrying a Whiteman whom he in the spirit of brotherhood with his brethren loots, and for that they (Bradford and Grace) must die. She is irresponsible, untrustworthy and the worst of all, a betrayer, hence she must die to create

a vacuum for the good ones to live. The golding knife which the heroine in *Dutchman* wedges is replaced by the pen-knife of Walker in *The Slave*.

As the action starts in *Dutchman*, we notice the White woman who comes in the traditional postures of the temptress. Her gestures, deeds and even words are deceitful, an exact replica of Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost* ⁵. She is eating an apple and at the same time pretends to be searching for her way. In her snakelike manner, she deceives her supposed-to be man by persistently insisting he helps her find her own way, all with the intention of destroying him.

The Whites never love the man they call a "Nigger" and want to see with great determination and with any means at their disposal that the blacks are extinguished entirely as a race. This evil in their minds is depicted in Lula's invitation to Clay. Like the trickster, she lures him to destruction as the words echo the fall of man in the Garden of Eden (Genesis: 3)⁶.

I saw you staring...down the vicinity of my legs; Eating apples together is always the first step; "What've you got that jacket and tie on in all these heat for?" (Dutchman, P.7).

She insists Clay is wrong in all he says and discards their relationship as phony:

Walked down the aisle ... searching you out"

"Dull, dull, dull; ... Everything you say is wrong. That's what makes you so attractive". (P. 7).

The Whites are always the same everywhere and at any time. They claim great knowledge of science and technology. Lula as a typical representative of White bitches and their cultural values in the bid to seeing that Clay never succeeds in his ardent mission, ransacks her bag and brings out some symbols of White dominance over Blacks, such as car keys, compact, comb, lipstick, wallet and sexy-cover paperbacks.

She confronts the victim on the idea of insincerity towards her. She claims to be Lena the hyena and Clay as Morris the hyena. She makes him to disown his culture, calls him a fascist, an escaped nigger, a middle-class black bastard, a liver-lipped White man and a would-be Christian, and even uncle Tom. When eventually Clay defiantly opposed her, thereby shattering her assumed greatness, she has no alternative than to kill him, thus depicting her prowess and ignorance.

In Black history, there is that revolutionary impulse to revenge against the White by taken on to their women. Clay in the text, *Dutchman*, clairvoyantly preoccupies himself – with the sensual pleasure from a white lady, in a party and in bed. Even at that, the woman taunts him, when she forces him into taking an oath, using his personal names, those of his parents, the notion of Black-aspirations and Black-history ⁷.

“Take your pick. Jackson, Johnson, or Williams”;

“My grandfather was a night watchman”.

“My mother was a republican, plantation were big open white washed places like heaven and everybody or ‘em was grooved to be there.

Just strummin’ and hummin’ all day”. And that’s how the blues was born”
(Dutchman P.15).

In all her movement, words and action, her contempt for the black race is justified. She mocks Clay’s unmanliness and pokes fun on his supposed ignorance of himself, the black race and the white domineering authority:

Lula: *“...about your manhood. What do you think?*

What do you think we’ve been talking all this time?

Clay: *“Well, I didn’t know it was that”*

That’s for sure. Every other thing in the world but that (Dutchman P.25).

To further buttress her White revolutionary spirit, she mocks him by assuming to know more and far better than Clay about Black cultural values and rages at his hypocrisy and acute ignorance:

You middle class black bastard. Forget your social working mother for a few seconds and let’s knock stomachs (Dutchman, P.31).

In the confrontation that ensues, Lula becomes a destroyer in her search for integrity. She actually pleads with the victim to save her from the problem she is – the difficulty and dilemma associated with her own kind of person. This is strange to a Blackman and it actually embarrasses as it shocks him on hearing those imploring words and gestures from a white woman, the “supposed” lord. She ironically construes this to mean Clay’s acceptance of the White cultural values and she in turn, inwardly rejoices. This angers Clay and that revolutionary impulse and desire in him makes him to speak the unavoidable truth which all the while has been avoided. He bluntly refuses all her lies and claims of lordship:

"If I'm a middle class fake Whiteman...let me be. And let me be in the way I want on black people. What a lotta shit that is (Dutchman, P.34)".

Clay sees Black arts as a sort of escapist sublimation of their anger towards the White race, a face that Lula perceives as untrue or factually incorrect⁸
Some kind of bastard literature...all it needs is a simple knife thrust... A whole people of neurotics, struggling to keep from being sane. And the only thing that would cure the neurosis would be your murder ... But who needs it? I'd rather be a fool. Insane. Safe with my words, and no deaths, and clean, hard thoughts urging me to a new conquests (Dutchman, P.35).

In *Dutchman*, Clay sees Lula's view about the blacks as all false and claims blacks need no words like the Whites do but only believe in revolution to prove the sanity they claim, as opposed to the Whites insanity:

My people. They don't need all those words. They don't need me to claim them. They got legs and arms of their own... They don't need any defense... They'll murder you, and have very rational explanations. (Dutchman, Pp. 35 - 36).

This revolutionary impulse is mirrored in the notion of history that has been a continuous trend with the black race. Clay in the first text, in the posture of a religious prophet, has foreseen a vision of his people's victory over the White domineering postures. Walker in the later text, being a reincarnation of Clay, both in spirit and body, leads the blacks to a near – attainment of that much desired victory. Walker, feeling betrayed by the one he trusts, rejects Grace, his ex-wife, ironically a white, for her inability to reconcile her love for him with his social-political movement towards the total extermination of the Whites. This Black revolutionary spirit in Walker could not be tolerated by Bradford, a White, as it is in his view a hindrance to the Whites existence. It is an impediment to

"Life as a purely anarchic relationship between man and God...or man and his work (The Slave, P. 15)".

In this regard, the relationship between individuals, class and race must emerge with the impulsiveness of the black revolution which entails the total annihilation of the white race and putting an end to their lordship postures over the blacks. It is at this junction that the opposing race war began.

Walker in *The Slave* is portrayed as a liar and murderer of the Whites who have in addition to being his antagonists, have perpetually remained his tormentors and have consciously relegated his public role as the people's military and revolutionary leader. They accused and labeled him all sort of nick-names until the truth finally downs on them that he is seriously intentioned in his zeal. Grace says,

"... it must be a sick task keeping so many lying separate ugliness together... and pretending they're something you've made and understand". (The Slave, P.61).

To this Walker answers:

"What I can use ..." to which Easley says

"What is this, the pragmatics of war"...

I thought you meant yourself to be a fantastic idealist?..."

"... Now you can call me the hypocritical idealist nigger murderer". (The Slave, Pp. 61 - 62).

To break the strong ties with his first self, a stage when he was of no historical significance; he abandons his public role and comes to his private assignment. He takes adequate care and a well calculated time to do his biddings—an intent or desire to avoid been called a traitor by his fellow revolutionists, which is a recourse to his great shame, the outdated, disregarded and abandoned White royalty. The collapse of the Bradford's home under the disastrous bombardment of the shells fired by the blacks in a symbolism or pointer to Walker's extrication of himself from his past and the eventual attainment of the much desired freedom from the Whites. The consistent argument as regards his claim of ownership of the two girls hinges on the Whites notion of Walker being insane. They are of the belief that a White murderer lacks affection for children and as such cannot father children. In a Machiavellian way, he agrees with the Bradford that the sail of his life is being directed by the storm of violence and betrayal from the Whites. To Walker, the end justifies the means. Things keep on changing. Subsequently, the discourse shift to the histories of Black struggles towards the emancipation of the entire Black-race, and how possible they can repudiate the principles (moral practices or teachings) that are anti-Black and generally accepted in the American society⁹. Succinctly put, Walker says:.

*What does it matter if there is more love or beauty (in black victory)?
Who the frisk cares. (The Slave, P.73).*

Bradford is opposed to this idea at which point Walker claims he has exchanged his most valued philosophy for a much desired revolt that is geared onwards to the attainment of black freedom:

No social protest ... right is in the act! And the act itself has some place in the world ... it makes some place for itself (The Slave, P.75).

As events progress, the drama unfolds to a stage where the mutual relationship between the black protagonist and the antagonistic Whites is shattered. Walker in the true spirit of a black, as a must, will do away with his old values to make ways for his new role and this inturn inevitably eliminates to Bradford's death. The only defense Grace has at this point is the accusation of insanity against Walker:

You're an insane man. (The Slave, P.81).

She could not belief her eyes seeing Walker actually masterminding the cause of the blacks and as such she exclaims hysterically:

You're out of your mind (P.82) to which Walker says:

*"... being out of your mind is the only thing that qualifies you to stay alive...
Easley was in his right mind ... That's the reason he's dead". (The Slave, P.82).*

The resultant conflict in *The Slave* is a pointer to the controversy between Clay and Lula in *Dutchman* but here Walker is an actual and determined revolutionist, unlike Clay who is a would – be revolutionist that prepares the stage thus paving the way for the eventual catharsis.

To Walker, though the black revolt may be seen as a Utopia venture which will lead to nothing, the deed has been done. It may be unable to create a concrete and better society as compares to the Whites, his ardent role as a champion of the black course, has fulfilled the notion of Black revolutionary impulse which in all ages has been the pre-occupation of blacks in black literature.

The revolutionary impulse is a concept that builds an antithesis which is eventually resolved by the synthesis applied by Walker. They run at the opposite ways. The protagonists' elimination of the two girls in *The Slave* is the exact opposite to the zeal with which Clay carried out his revolutionary strategies in *Dutchman*. Walker in a determined bid, to show

the extent of this impulse, risked his life to set the two daughters free from the uncompromising White culture.

In *Dutchman*, Clay admires and assumes the role of a White and Lula mocks at his stupidity. But the perpetrators of violence must be made to know how it feels to be recipients of violence. How can they know unless the victims teach them? Walker is an actual victim and is determined to teach Bradford. He hates mockery and as such, he instantly kills the two girls just to get rid of any White trace on his roots. In the progress of the play, Walker unknowingly quotes from one of Yeats's most popular poems, "News for the Delphic Oracle" concerning wounded innocence:

*"Straddling each dolphin's back
And steadied by a fin
Those innocents relive their death
Their wounds open again". (The Slave, P.50).*

This is a symbolism of the ironic and un-intentional destruction of his possession, the murder of his two daughters, Catherine and Elizabeth.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, LeRoi Jones seems to be saying that all Black American must expect his person to be violated by the Whiteman, but he must know that the Whiteman's person is inviolable. This is an understatement and a paradox of what should be the actual case or situation. To Jones, Black folks must never, tacitly or otherwise, surrender one single right guaranteed to any American of other race. The right of self-defense is the most basic of human rights, recognized by all the people everywhere. It is certainly more important than the right to eat frankfurters while sitting down, or to get a black haircut in a White barbershop or to get a night lodging in any White ladies house. Indeed, it is more important than the right to vote. In many places in the South the Negro cannot get to the polls without the right of self-defence. Hence, the revolutionary impulse in Leroi Jones' characters, in all ramifications, is justified.

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 - iv. Instinct and habit, p. 145,
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generation later, the fantasy writer Michael Moorcock revisited the quip: jailers love escapism – it's escape they can't stand. Today, in the early years of the 21st century, escapism – the act of withdrawing from the premises of the real world into fantasy worlds – has taken on a scale and scope quite beyond anything Lewis have envisioned.

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