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Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman and the Slave*: Play of Double Consciousness

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Abstract:

The discourses of 18th and 19th century exhibit a trend for disseminating the concept of identity formation which is linked to various aspects of survival related to race, nation and ethnicity. The aspect of race has been projected in numerous literary works. Racial favoritism results in the valorization of a particular race as superior to other racial groups. This tendency of giving higher rank to a peculiar race is common among African Americans; i.e. prioritizing the whites. A sense of black consciousness and double consciousness become a major concern in the life of African Americans. They are trapped in dual identity. This paper traces elements of double consciousness in the life of the protagonist of Imamu Amiri Baraka's play *Dutchman and the Slave*.

Keywords: Racism, Black consciousness and Double consciousness

Issues of racial segregation and Black Nationalism have been a major concern in the works produced among African American writers of all centuries. Racial discrimination has always been a major concern in the lives of African Americans. With the Harlem Renaissance of 1920s there emerged a flowering of literature and arts that are uniquely assertive of the Black identity. Many African-American writers aimed at building a literary scene that should present the truth about life of African-American people. Black consciousness and double consciousness became major concerns in Black American writings.

Black consciousness is a sense of accepting and following one's identity as Black without being imitative of the culture of the dominant Whites. Double consciousness is a term coined by W. E. B. Du Bois that is particularly related to his famous theory of African American "double consciousness." The term originally refers to the conflicting tendencies in the psyche of the individual while revisiting one's African heritage by revering the culture of homeland with Eurocentric education. Du Bois asserts double consciousness as "a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois 3)." While revisiting one's own culture through the stereotypical models of comprehension distributed by the Eurocentric system of thought one becomes an alien in one's own original landscape.

W. E. B. Du Bois identifies the same struggle in the life of the African-American. In W. E. B. Du Bois terms, this conflict arises from the desire to achieve a consciousness of the identity that connects with one's original self. By original self, the author indicates the eclectic personal experiences and themes of psychological perception influenced by the culture, space and social milieu of the individual's place of origin. This place of origin could be the place of origin of the

individual's forefathers, since Black experience is not essentially subjective, within the premises of this analysis. The individual longs for "a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn't bleach his Negro blood in a flood of White Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world (Du Bois 4)."

In Du Bois's view, the Black individual "simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face (Dubois 4)."

There are two schools of thought regarding the sense of double consciousness; "assimilationist" and "nationalist". Assimilationist view projects that Black Americans will only be accepted and recognized as humans by assimilating the way of thinking of the mainstream White Americans. Nationalist view, on the other hand, perpetuates the need to adhere to the native land and culture without assimilating the White American culture and showing tendency to look back to homeland (Africa). The survival of the Black people in America, in a way, is hellish.

Many African-American writers have extensively penned the idea of double-consciousness. Amiri Baraka (October 7, 1934 – January 9, 2014), known as LeRoi Jones and Imamu Amiri Baraka, was an African-American writer. He wrote in many genres such as poetry, drama, fiction, essays, and music criticism. He was the author of numerous books of poetry and taught at a number of universities. He received the PEN Open Book Award.

Baraka states in his article "The Myth of a 'Negro Literature'" published in 1962; "The Negro, as a writer, has always been a social object, whether glorifying the concept of White superiority, or crying out against it. He has never moved into the position where he could propose his own symbols, erect his own personal myths, as any great literature must (Baraka 20)." One could also read a sense of dejection in Baraka's words that reflect the reality of the Blacks in America and around the world. The African-Americans have a voice, but that voice constantly rises against some form of social injustice or supporting some other cause. There never was, as Baraka suggests, a set of symbols to celebrate the artistic victories of individual lives.

Baraka's works stand as a trumpet articulating the silenced voice of the African American community and of the subalterns throughout the world. Double consciousness to him is a tool to pacify the Blacks for being in doubleness, at the same time, for Whites as a tool to objectify the Blacks through the process of 'culturing'.

Amiri Baraka's masterpiece play is *Dutchman and the Slave* (1964). The play can be read as a political allegory depicting the tension between Black and White. Baraka's racial awareness has been dealt with poignantly in *Dutchman*. The paper aims at drawing the elements of double consciousness the protagonist Clay faces in his life and the difficulties he encounters on the way of becoming an 'accepted human being' among the White Americans. Amiri Baraka's comment on *Dutchman* as the play is about the difficulty of becoming a man in America is remarkable.

The intriguing plot deals exclusively with a young White lady named Lula and a young Black man named Clay who both ride the subway train in New York City. Baraka finds an apt name for his protagonist. The word clay suggests the color of clay, a mixture of Black and White. This in a symbolic way suggests the identity of the protagonist. He is trapped in the midst of both colors.

Lula starts, for the first time, her flirtatious behavior to manipulate Clay's identity by eating an apple which has an allusion to biblical Eve. Both engage in conversation by accusing and abusing each other's identity. In the first part of the play, language and actions are strongly under the control of Lula and Clay remains passive.

Lula teases Clay for being Black and passive, and abuses him for gazing at her buttocks. Once she understands Clay can easily be manipulated, she puts her hands on his lap and gives him the apple. She then asks his permission for sex with him after a party. This makes Clay hopeful about having sex with her.

Clay waits for Lula to engage in sex first, though he thinks that he is lucky to have sex with a White woman. Lula derides him for his Anglo-American speech and his college education. Lula says, "you are a well-known type, (3)" and "I know you like the palm of my hand (4)". Lula criticizes the education Clay received. "And you went to a colored college where everybody thought they were Averell Harriman. (5)"

Lula invariably irritates Clay by using abusive and scornful words. "You middle-class Black bastard. Forget your social-working mother for a few seconds... (8)." When Clay refuses to dance with her Lula gets angered and delivers; "shaking that wild root cream oil on your knotty head, jackets buttoning up to your chin, so full of White man's words Christ, God, Get up' ... (8)."

Lula's comments make him resentful and repellent. Clay out of frustration declares that it's his choice to live his life the way he wishes even if she approves him or not. In the second part, Clay controls the action. He grabs the opportunity to drive back Lula's opprobrious approach toward him. Clay utters, "If I'm a middleclass fake White man... let me be. And let me be in the way I want....let me be who I feel like being....Not the pure heart, the pumping Black heart....You great liberated whore! You fuck some Black man, and right away you're an expert on Black people. (9)" Clay asserts his Black self and identity and accuses Lula of knowing nothing but "luxury." Even though Clay appears as a well-educated man who doesn't feel like a representative of subjugated other, at his deep psyche, he belongs to the true African race who understands Black culture well although Clay doesn't directly state his identity as Black since he wants to mingle with the White intellectuals.

Baraka delineates a Black man's search for his identity when he is immobilized under the feeling of doubleness in America. It's dubious from the behavior of Clay about his stand regarding racism. He wants to be ignorant about the racial prejudices and segregation that are going on in America. He doesn't want to fight with the mighty Whites, but rather he desires to be molded in the way of Eurocentric life style. It shows his assimilationist tendency for establishing an identity of his own. However, this identity he imagines for himself is colored with the cultural traits of the oppressive state. At last his murder by Lula becomes a testimony of vilification for

all the Blacks who are making self destructive valorization of White Man's culture. The play ends with Lula's search for another Black man for making him a scapegoat of her racial bias.

Amiri Baraka, in *Dutchman*, attempts to blast the assimilationist tendencies of Black people in general for establishing the existing self-destroying contact with the mainstream White Americans. In short, Baraka strongly opposes this tendency of assimilation and being in doubleness. He points out the need to adhere to the value of one's homeland and culture. Thus, *Dutchman* controverts Eurocentric culture that derides the value of the so-called 'subaltern culture' and claims that the sense of double consciousness is suicidal.

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