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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## The Paradoxical Characterization in *Dutchman*: Reflection of Baraka's Ambivalent Stance in the 1960s

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**ABSTRACT**

*Dutchman* was read by many critics as Amiri Baraka's nationalist manifesto advocating black unity to violently fight against white dominance. In fact, Amiri Baraka's thoughts of nationalism in this period were not so fixed but rather paradoxical. Due to personal growth and social background, Baraka devotes himself to black nationalism as a means of solving his alienation from blacks. However, the revolutionary part of black nationalism blinds him of its shortcoming: exclusiveness, which runs counter to Baraka's social concern. What Baraka is concerned about is the African Americans and the whole Americans who suffer oppression. His uncertain stance reflects itself in the artistic creation of Clay and Lula. Clay and Lula are not simply angry black nationalists and white racists. When Clay suffers from racial bullying, his defiance shows the revolutionary side of nationalism. Paradoxically, he is also an obedient middle class assimilated by white culture. Lula is both a racist and a member of the lower class, which reflects Baraka's Marxism influence.

**KEYWORDS**

Amiri Baraka, *Dutchman*, black nationalism, political stance

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**1. Introduction**

Amiri Baraka, previously known as LeRoi Jones, as one of the most influential writers in Afro-American literature, has received colossal critical attention for his various artistic and social achievements. He was an American writer of poetry, drama, fiction, essays, and music criticism. From the 1960s to the 1990s, his literary expression has been one of the most persistent and controversial. Many critics labeled him as a violent nationalist, anti-Semite, misogynist, homosexual, and so on. For example, Ishmael Reed accused him of "endless depictions of white women as nymphomaniacs" (17). At the same time, other critics recognized his talent in literary creation. Arnold Rampersad counted Baraka with Ralph Ellison and other seven great writers "as one of the eight figures... who have significantly affected the course of African-American literary culture<sup>1</sup>." Honors and awards proved his reputation as well. Baraka served as Poet Laureate of New Jersey, received honors from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment, the Langston Hughes Award from the City College of New York, the Rockefeller Foundation Award, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the Before Columbus Foundation Lifetime Achievement Awards.

*Dutchman* was first played at the Cherry Lane Theater in Greenwich Village, New York, in March 1964, which made Amiri Baraka famous. The play won an Obie Award and was noted by Norman Mailer as "the best play in America<sup>2</sup>" (qtd. in Baraka xx). *Dutchman* was deeply rooted in the social background of the 1950s and 1960s and was the last play produced by Baraka under his birth name LeRoi Jones. The play may be described as a political allegory depicting black, white relations in the 1960s. The *Dutchman* is a play of entrapment in which a white woman Lula and a middle-class black man Clay express their murderous hatred on a subway.

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<sup>1</sup> Quotation from online materials <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/amiri-baraka>>

<sup>2</sup> Baraka, Amiri. *The LeRoi Jones/ Amiri Baraka Reader*. edited by William J. Harris. Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991.

The underground location of the drama is mythical or subconscious as the title refers to the fate of a flying dutchman doomed to sail forever.

## 2. Literature Review

*Dutchman* has received abundant critical attention since its debut. Abroad, most criticism examines the nationalistic, polemical, mythological, or revolutionary nature of his literary output in *Dutchman*. The works are so vital and rich with these themes. Among nationalistic concerns, overseas studies tend to argue the question of whether *Dutchman* is revolutionary or not. It is mainly interpreted as a nationalist manifesto. In *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask*, Kimberly W. Benson traces the tragic pattern in Clay's fall, through which he places Clay historically as a pre-revolutionary victim who is also the forerunner of eventual black triumph. Several other studies have also projected the play's concern with black "manhood" and identity, thinking Clay a failure of selfhood. C. W. E. Bigsby reads a direct opposition between language and action, and he sees Clay as a black intellectual who recognizes "the simple logic of revolt" but "wishes to lapse back into the safety of words and the indirections of art" (398). In "Looking into Black Skull: Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman* and the Psychology of Race," Piggford makes a similar argument by saying that "clay is a Faustian anti-hero... martyred for the black revolutionary cause" and *Dutchman* represents a "militant attitude" on the part of the black American playwrights (74). Writing contrary to the researches of these critics above, several other critics noticed the continuity of Baraka's change in political belief. William J. Harris's *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka, The Jazz Age*, engage the sort of claim that Baraka's political "shift was not as abrupt as it has often been seen." (18). He affirms that Baraka's shift has a process, and *Dutchman*, the production of that period, contains both white and black influences.

Up to now, there has been no systematic research on *Dutchman* or Baraka himself in China. Current studies on *Dutchman* often focus on character analysis and mythological archetypes. Zhang Na and Zhang Xinying explored myth-archetypal scenes and systems. Through the analysis of traditional African myths and Eden myths, Zhang thought the play revealed Baraka's disillusionment and abandonment of racial reconciliation. And Zhang Xinying pointed out the relationship of Baraka's use of mythological systems of Christianity, Greece, and Africa with his political imagination. Likewise, Hu Yamin, in her article "On Amiri Baraka and His Short Play *Dutchman*," states that Baraka in the play aggressively attacks racial discrimination in American society. In Li Hongyan's "Man and Woman Wandering Between Love and Hatred: A Reanalysis of the Images of the Hero and Heroine in *Dutchman*," we see a different viewpoint. Through rereading the characterization of Clay and Lula, she argued that the rebellion and compromise of the protagonists revealed that, in addition to the voice of protest, *Dutchman* is also filled with strong senses of compromise and deep love between the white and the black. She saw Baraka's less striking aspect in revolutionary consciousness and strength of rebellion.

Critics like William J. Harris and Li Hongyan noted the less revolutionary aspect of Amiri Baraka in *Dutchman*. My disagreement with these other readings lies in their rather unproblematic assumptions that the play is Baraka's sheer nationalist manifesto advocating violent confrontation and protest. Thus, following the lead of cultural critics like William Harris and Li Hongyan, I shall argue that *Dutchman* not only shows Baraka's nationalist thought. More importantly, through the paradoxical characterization of Clay, it explores a common phenomenon among the blacks: the loss of blackness. Paradoxical characterization of Lula as a racist and a lower-class person shows Marxist influence in Baraka. Further, the paradoxical characterizations reflect Baraka's inner conflicts and perplexities in the early 1960s, when he was wandering between the life of the white avant-garde poets and the passion of the black civil rights movement.

## 3. Clay's Racial Bullying Response: Violence and Obedience

Racial bullying is a form of bullying where the bully treats a certain person or group in a cruel, insulting, threatening, or aggressive fashion based on racial differences. Racial bullying is defined as:

A kind of bullying that focuses on the nature of target groups that are thought to elicit negative treatment. Thus negative treatment is directed towards a person who is of a different racial group from the perpetrator; it is often called racial bullying or racial harassment. (Rigby 38)

Thus, the bully can make fun of the victims by their racial backgrounds, such as color, nationality, ethnicity, or race. As a member of the African-American, Clay must experience colossal racial bullying in a white-dominated society, which is epitomized in Lula's racism in the play. Within the play, Lula racially bullies Clay through words and actions. Clay experiences various verbal bullying containing racial stereotyping. The stereotypes employed are from the escaped slave to Uncle Tom to a 'middle-class fake white man' (Baraka, *LeRoi Jones* 94). As in this case:

CLAY: Frighten me? Why should they frighten me?

LULA: 'Cause you're an escaped nigger.

CLAY: Yeah?

LULA: 'cause you scrawled through the wire and made tracks to my side.

CLAY: Wire? (93)

Within this conversation, Lula calls Clay an "escaped nigger". It means that Lula refers to Clay as an African American slave who escapes from his master and this statement clearly represents bullying. As Rigby says, it is possible for the bully to suppress the victim by mentioning racial backgrounds, such as the victim's race, color, ethnicity, and origin. Lula's mockery by calling Clay an "escaped nigger" is a humiliation toward his identity as an African American. At the end of the play, Lula, plunging her knife into Clay's chest and throwing him off the train, is blatant racial bullying and murder.

Though Clay faces numerous bullying, Baraka's portrayal of him is tricky. Clay is portrayed as neither extremely violent nor totally obedient. We can find violence and obedience coexist in him. Clay is wearing, borrowing Franz Fanon's term, a "white mask," under which hides his protest and anger. It was not until Lula, who keeps stimulating and infuriating Clay that he finally takes off his white mask and expresses his racial anger and protest. We see two different characterizations in Clay. On the one hand, he is the polite, well-educated man who caters to white people and wears a "three-button suit" and "striped tie" in hot summer crowded in the subway. On the other hand, he becomes the infuriated black man who harbors hatred and violence toward the whites because of years of racism and unfair treatment.

First, we look at his violent characterization. At the end of the play, Clay changes into a totally different person than before. He had a final monologue that was full of agitation, violence, and murder, in which he accused the whites of arrogance and ignorance about the blacks. He expressed his long-pressed anger and hatred toward white people. Black people will "cut your throats, and drag you out to the edge of your cities so the flesh can fall away from your bones, in sanitary isolation (Baraka, *LeRoi Jones* 98). Clay's long, accusatory harangue talks about his "pure heart, the pumping black heart" and traces the connection between black rage and black art that has been the focus of much attention. His final monologue has often been seen as an expression of Baraka's nationalist thought. Seen this way, the obedient part of clay would be unnecessary. Why doesn't Baraka create a total revolter who expresses his nationalist anger and violence?

Through the description of Clay's obedient aspect, what Baraka more wants to talk about is the phenomenon among the African Americans: the loss of blackness. Why would Clay be obedient when he encounters Lula's confrontation? Frantz Fanon, in his *black skins, White Masks* notes that inferiority complex is widespread among the blacks: "Professor D. Westermann, in *The African Today*, says that the negroes' inferiority complex is particularly intensified among the most educated, who must struggle with it unceasingly" (25). They struggle by adopting the white culture, values, and ways of thinking because "the colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle" (18). In the play, Clay is a typical black man with a white mask who has internalized the white value and would wear top buttoned suits in steaming hot summer just to leave people a successful middle-class image. He is in the lower hand in his interaction with Lula, who surely comes from a lower social stratum. Clay receives a good education and is middle class, while Lula wears loud lipstick and is probably a prostitute. He still receives Lula's seduction and remains polite when Lula insults and mocks him. All this happened because he uses it as verification. It verifies him as being accepted by this white-dominated society. Fanon relates the power with black men's desire of being white, "who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me, she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man" (63). For black men and some other minorities, being admired by a white woman often symbolizes some kind of special power they have done their best to obtain from white society. By representing Clay's obedient side, Baraka intends to show the problems of losing blackness that existed among the blacks.

#### **4. Lula as Racial Oppressor and Oppressed Lower-Class People**

Like Clay, the portrayal of protagonist Lula is worth mentioning. Lula shows double personality in the play. Reading the play, Lula leaves us the impression of a racist. At the same time, Baraka portrays her as a lower-class person. I argue that Baraka shows his Marxism influence in the play through his description of Lula as an oppressed/down-trodden person

The name of the play, *Dutchman* itself, draws its inspiration from the mythology of Flying Dutchman. According to the tale, the captain of the Flying Dutchman, being cursed by an angry Deity and punished to never be able to make port, is doomed to sail the oceans forever combating the tempest. And his crew are all dead men who can only obey his orders but are unable to talk. Seen in this way, there is a connection between the ship of Flying Dutchman and Lula. In an interview illustrating how he writes, Baraka expresses his intention on the title Dutchman. He says, "It's all Dutchman. I had nothing really fixed in my mind" (Baraka & Salaam 214). Lula can be a Dutchman who is like the captain of the ship, controlling the whole picture. The passengers in the train are her crew, who are all silent and lifeless, obey her orders like inhuman machines. She, leading her crew, fight in the "tempest" of racism with negroes one after another. Further, the first vessel in history that carried Blacks into America and made these people never come back to their homeland was navigated by the Dutch. It intensifies the racial theme in the play. In *Dutchman*, Lula

intends to seduce, mock, and kill Clay. All these insulting words like black nigger, Uncle Tom, liver-lipped white man, and mockery of belly rub show the fact of Lula as a racist.

However, she is not always a racial oppressor in her characterization. She shows her another side in the play. She reminds Clay that he will never get out of his responsibility when he forgets his history and cultural heritage. She shouts to Clay, "don't sit there dying the way they (the whites) want you to die." (Baraka, *LeRoi Jones* 95) There isn't just a confrontation between a black man and a white woman. Also, there is the apathy of one oppressed people toward the other. It is well acknowledged that Amiri Baraka is a mouthpiece for the Blacks in the 1960s. Critics reached a common agreement that Baraka's works were influenced by Marxism after 1970, more exactly in 1974. Thus, his concern for working people in that period is ignored by most critics. Once in an interview with D. H. Melhem back in 1982, he was asked who is his preferred audience. His answer is the great majority of working people in America. Melhem goes on to ask whether he had a different audience he was writing for in the past. He responded: "I think my early days of writing... I think I wanted to reach everybody, but, obviously, my concerns were not broad enough" (Melhem, 91). What he cares about is not only the living condition of the blacks but also those who were oppressed in the society, including the lower-class whites. I find the same point of view in Maurice Angus Lee, whose research claims the theory that the Marxist influence in Baraka's work has been consistent since 1961 and that since 1970 the philosophy has simply been more open and pronounced (v). Likewise, Theodore R. Hudson's book *From LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka*, as one of the first literary studies of Baraka's works, comments that Baraka's "artistic and personal development has not followed an orderly, coordinated or causal progression" (xi). William J. Harris makes the same statement that "his (Amiri Baraka) shift from cultural nationalist to revolutionary Marxist was not as abrupt as it has often been seen" (18). Hence, Baraka's Marxism influence is not from the 1970s, and it could be extended to the 1960s.

As Baraka's artistic creation in the 1960s, *Dutchman* represents his Marxist idea, which could be seen in Lula's attitudes toward Clay. It is easy to see Lula's racist part, while the part of her being oppressed may be ignored. From her words and the way she dresses, we notice her lower-class status. What she wears are bright, skimpy summer clothes and sandals. Though she is slender and beautiful, "the loud lipstick in somebody's good taste" gives her away. She probably is a whore for her tenement have a lot of Italians and lying Americans" (Baraka, *LeRoi Jones* 85). And the only person in her family ever to amount to anything is her mother, a communist. As a member of the lower class, she is excluded from the dominant society. Thus, when she sees Clay being oppressed like her because of his race and color, she also can sense his feeling. Apart from pouring racial hatred, which history has taught her, she also shows her empathy and aspiration of black protestant. She mocks and humiliates Clay by rub bellies dance and calls him a "murderer in order to warn him the danger of assimilation into white society and abandonment of black culture. For Lula, Clay's catering to the whites is passive and doesn't work. What she agrees with is resistant and protestant. Later, she even urges Clay to resist oppression by revolution: "Get up and scream at these people. Like scream meaningless shit in these hopeless faces... Clay. Clay, you got to break out. Don't sit there dying the way they want you to die. Get up" (Baraka, *LeRoi Jones* 95). Through Lula, we see Baraka's revolutionary thought. And the most revolutionary elements of Baraka's writing are Marxist. Marx is on call to bring about necessary change that "the communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a communist revolution... Workingmen of all countries, unite!" (44). It is Lula who wants Clay to fight back all the oppression that he received from society. Combining her communist family background, Lula is influenced by certain Marxist thoughts. In Lula, we see the revolutionary mind of the lower class and Baraka's latent sympathy toward them, and by portraying such a character, Baraka shows his Marxist influence.

### 5. Baraka's Ambivalent Political Stance

Amiri Baraka holds the attitude that arts should serve political functions. "When people say, 'well, your art is political,' I say, 'all art is political.'" he expressed clearly his point about the relationship between art and politics (Marable, 12). For him, art is not for art's sake. Rather, it serves for ideological ends, and it is propaganda trying to make readers/audiences believe something – emotionally, intellectually. So, the works he writes have become his political tools with the intention to raise people or against certain political ideologies. He wants "poems that kill." With no exception, *Dutchman* is closely related to his political thoughts.

To make clear Baraka's ambivalent political stance, it is essential to examine the complicated social background under which his play is produced. Written in 1964, *Dutchman* is against the social backdrop of black people struggling for their rights. In the middle of the 1950s and 1960s, the political movement of the Civil Rights Movement spread America. What Martin Luther King dreams of race relations is racial integration. He is in support of the peaceful protest against racism and injustice so as to engender equality and peace between the two races. While most African leaders spared efforts in the civil rights movement to integrate African-Americans into mainstream American life, a group of black people held an aggressive and unyielding anti-white position, which was a bedrock of black nationalism. Malcolm X was one of the leaders of Black nationalism who advocated violent protestants, black independence, and black self-government. He harbors the thinking of Black supremacy, separatism, and control of politics within its own community. He strongly opposed the tactics of racial integration and nonviolence advocated by civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King. At that period, Amiri Baraka was still LeRoi Jones, who married a Jewish white wife, lived in Greenwich

Village, and hang out with the white Beat poets like Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. Works he published at this time, for instance, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, was bohemian and open in form, which is greatly influenced by his white avant-garde friends. However, things do not always go smoothly. In his autobiography, he expressed his "day-to-day confrontations" with white men in later times and the feeling of "alienation from black" (Baraka, *Autobiography* 187). Thus, we see Baraka is in need of finding his position as a black man and get away from these white friends because their concerns and standpoint don't satisfy his needs anymore. The trip to Cuba and interaction with Fidel Castro Malcolm X provide intimate chances for him. He set his eyes on black culture. He himself admitted that Castro and Malcolm X are "turning points in my life" and "my maximum culture heroes" (Baraka *LeRoi Jones* xx, Manning 5). In order to get rid of the influence of avant-garde and remake connection with his black identity, Baraka pours nationalist elements like violence and anger into Clay. In fact, his racial opinion was not definite and clear. Luo Liangong holds the same view that it was not until the death of Malcolm X in 1965 that Baraka's viewpoint about race became clear (36). That is to say; Baraka was struggling between two different cultures. That's why we are able to see the paradoxical characterization of Clay as both an angry young man and an obedient middle-class assimilating to the white society.

His portrayal of Lula as a lower class reveals Baraka's political concern: human beings. It is not the blacks that he is always concerned about but also the whole oppressed American. Lloyd W. Brown's statement supports my argument: Baraka's insights are always rooted in a deep-seated contempt for what he sees as the defects of Western culture as a whole and American society in particular (104). Because of his concern for the whole American, he later finds the defect of black nationalism and then chooses Marxism to see the world from a class perspective rather than a racial angle. Black nationalism advocates violence to resist injustice. At that time, violent conflicts against black people are nonstop. The Blacks suffer from the whites' unfair treatment for a long time, which makes violent counterattacks very infectious to these black people who have long suppressed their anger. But the violent side of black nationalism blinds people from seeing its drawbacks: its exclusiveness. Black nationalism divides people into two opposite sides based on race differences. Black, yes; white, no. I'll deny and destroy you as long as you're white. It ignores the diversity and complexity among white groups who are all excluded from the mainstream for being different. More significantly, it ignores differences within the blacks. The middle-class black people may not need to fight for black rights because they are likely to benefit from it. Like Baraka later mentions about electoral politics, a black middle-class benefits from those electoral politics and no changes for the majority (Melhem 96). From the beginning, his aspiration is different from black nationalism. He strives for the majority of the society, not the privileged few. Thus, we see *Dutchman* as not a mere expression of nationalism. Rather, it is a transitory period of the author during which period he explores different ways to achieve his aspiration killing off any injustice.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper, studying *Dutchman* Amiri Baraka's play in 1964, aims to reveal the political stance of Amiri Barak in that period. By analyzing the paradoxical characterization of Clay and Lula, this paper challenges the long-held view that *Dutchman* is Amiri Baraka's expression of black nationalism. By Frantz Fanon's colonialism theory, this paper sees through Clay's image as not a mere revolutionary nationalist. Clay's obedience and assimilation part illuminate Baraka's focus on the problem of lacking blackness among black people. Applying Marxism, the author finds Amiri Baraka's portrayal of Lula as oppressed lower-class, which manifests Baraka's political concern for the oppressed Americans instead of the African Americans alone. Baraka's political uncertainty is further evidenced by his social background and his life experience in the early 1960s when he was wandering between the influences of the white avant-garde poets and the Black Civil Rights Movement. My study gives a different interpretation of Baraka's political stance in the 1960s. My argument that *Dutchman* reveals Baraka's ambivalent political stance in the 1960s challenges the viewpoint thinking *Dutchman* as Baraka's expression of nationalist ideas. However, *Dutchman* is the main text in the article. To have a full-scale investigation of Baraka's political thought in the 1960s, the links of *Dutchman* and Baraka's other works written in that period deserve critical attention.

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