THE DRAMATIZATION OF RACISM AND SLAVERY IN LEROI JONES'S *DUTCHMAN*

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Abstract
This paper takes an overview of African-American's experiences in America. It is a fact that racism and slavery are the major issues in African-American literature. It is against this background, that this paper attempts to make readers realize the thematic pre-occupation in LeRoi Jones's Dutchman by analyzing the concept of slavery and racial segregation in African-Americans. Also, it examines the historical perspective of African-American writing narrative, and the effects of racism and slavery, which include: loss of identity, oppression, assault, poverty, injustice, amongst others, and the ways in which the African-Americans reactes to racism. Therefore, we can say that African-American literature was and is still written to protest against ill-treatment, racial discrimination and injustice meted out to Blacks in all ramifications, with the vision of restoring their self pride, culture, and identity as portrayed in Dutchman. Racial scholars argue strongly that, racism brings rate of mortality, morbidity, and overall well-being that vary depending on socially assigned race. Eliminating racism and slavery is therefore central to achieving freedom. The paper adopts antiracism as a framework as well as a method for this study. The paper finds out that racism and slavery is inhuman, and

concludes that, the fight against racism and slavery is worth dying for.

Keywords: African-American, Blacks, Dramatization, Racism and Slavery.

Introduction

The African-Americans' bitter experiences derive mostly from racism and slavery. Therefore, the African-Americans literature is aimed at rejuvenating and restoring their identity, culture and position. Africans faced a great ordeal trying to survive hardship on their journey across the Atlantic Ocean on arrival to America; they were conscripted into forced labour, maltreated, abused and demoralized on the cotton fields and plantations where they were made to work as slaves. As a result of this hardship, deprivation and degradation, Africa-Americans began to express themselves through Negro Spirituals which marked the beginning of the artistic expressions of their emotion. They told stories of unpleasant experience of slavery and oppression through pamphlet and short stories, which were later, referred to as "Slave Narratives" or 'Secret Texts" because they were written without the knowledge of slave masters. This inhuman trade led to transportation of Africans to America to work as slave on the plantation where they experienced unimaginable oppression from white slave owner. Many youth are ignorant of this fact and see America as a peaceful place and bed of roses (Oyigbenu, 2013:1).

Blacks never tend to forget the phenomenon that took them to the unfriendly society in which they find themselves today. The gruesomeness of their plight during these eras makes people consider slavery as being as terrible as hell. Predicated on their bitter experiences, nostalgia suffused their hearts and made them think of their homeland. It is in the capacity that Lewis Nkosi postulates that: The Negro had never forgotten that he has not come from Africa like other emigrates who came out of their own free will, looking for fame and fortunes. The Negro was wrenched from his land and carried into slavery in the most shameful way possible (Lewis 1965: 102).

It is also in this view that one of the renaissance writers, named Claude McKay in his poem *to the White Friends* writes: My eye grew dim I could no more gaze, A wave of longing though my body swept; and Hungry for the aid familiar ways, I turned Aside and bowed my head and wept (1917:5).

The above quoted lines could be said to be a 'song of sorrow' expressing the oppression, agonies of the African-Americans inherent in the fact that they were brutally transplanted into the Americas. Cutting them from their origin and their fatherland, home and culture and planted in the land of "hostile" weather and people.

It is this experience of the black slaves that LeRoi Jones tries to capture in *Dutchman*. In this play, Jones recalls the plight of the Africans that were sold into slavery between 1700's and 1860's through the convenience of their own fellow Africans. They were transplanted to America, Canada, the Caribbean Island and other parts of the world. The Africans taken to America are now referred to as "African- Americans" while those on the Caribbean Island are called "Afro-Caribbean" but they all have a common problem-racial discrimination.

In one of the articles entitled, "White Racism: Its Root, Form, and Function", comer provides an in-depth examination and analysis of racism as a derivative engendered by psychological insecurity and inadequacy on the part of the Anglo-Saxon Protestants. He explains that: Racism is a low-level defense and adjustment mechanism utilized by groups to deal with psychological and social insecurities similar to the manner in which individuals utilize defense and adjustment mechanisms to deal with anxiety (Cited in Jones, ed., 202:361).

In an essay entitled, "Lwing Dangerously: Identity Politics and the New Cultural Racism", Guroy and McLaren maintain that racism is a development within the historical confluence of "colonialism and modern slavery are rested on a blatant ideological appeal to pseudo biological and scientific theories of racism to justify inequality, hierarchies and exploitation as part of the universal order" (36).

In south America, and in the British and French Caribbean, there was one of the extreme exploitations in North America. Slaves were denied the legal protection and freedoms available to European servants, and were forced to work longer and harder and were subjected to more severe punishments if they resisted. Therefore, costs of feeding and clothing slaves could be reduced to the smallest amount needed to keep them alive and fit to work on plantations. It was quite obvious that, in the United States of America, the nature of slave labour differed from one region to another. Slaves in northern colonies performed a variety of tasks working beside their owners or other whites or they worked individually or sometimes with one or two other slaves and required little supervision.

Besides, given the stable export of West African gold and ivories and the development of the Asiatic trading empire by the Portuguese, the commercial dealings between West Africa and Europe became common and inexpensive (Klein and Vinson, 2007). African slave labour then became the most stable and reliable source of labour as sugar cultivation expanded during the second half of the sixteenth century. Eventually all the European colonial powers turned to imported slaves, predominantly Africans, as they advanced plantation agriculture.

Acemoglu et al (2012), examined the long-long impact of slavery on current development outcomes in Colombia (7). The study found that past slavery is associated with increased poverty, lower public good provision and higher levels of land inequality today.

Some of the research questions in this study are:

- Can one ever really quantify the number of Africans that died on the continent resisting being captured as slaves?
- Can anyone ever quantify the number of Africans that died in the infamous “middle passage” in slave ships on their journey into slavery in continental America and the Caribbean?
- How does one quantify the number of Africans and their descendants that died on plantations all over the world?

Conceptual Clarification

To ensure the clarity of this paper, the key concepts would be briefly explained. These are: African-Americans, dramatization, racism, slavery.

African-American- Urry defines the African-American as a "Victim diaspora" whose citizenship status developed from an unsought association America. He is a product of Munoz's Man's search for wealth, fame or trade, resulting in conquest and domination …" (24). From a historical perspective, the citizenship question and status of the African in the New World goes beyond 1619 when the African landed in the Virginia, several years ahead of the New England Plymouth Fathers. As the oldest and largest immigrant ethnic nationality in the United States, having been there for over four hundred years, the African-American occupies the status of a Native American and should be seen and treated as such.

To this regard, the Mazruis contend that: In the USA, African-Americans are about the only minority group whose linguistic heritage has virtually been obliterated by centuries of European enslavement and racial oppression. The struggle about the 'nature' of Ebonics, therefore, must be seen as an aspect of the wider African-American struggle for self-determination and (re) possessions of their history (2002:34).

Dramatization – Is the shape of structure plan for execution within the theater, where the performing artists act and perform definite activity. Dramatization has to do with the literary interpretation as well as simulation of a problem or situation in the broad field of human relations on a given theme of discussion. It is used to describe a play that is adopted from a real event or a novel.

Racism: *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines racism as thus: Any action, practice or belief that reflects the racial world view- the ideology that humans are divided into separate and exclusive biological entities called "races", that there is a casual

link between inherited physical traits and traits of personality, intellect, morality, and other cultural behavioural features, and that some races are innately superior to others (Britannica 1984:880).

Judging from the aforementioned definition, it can be deduced that racism is an active or passive response to the specious believe that genetically transmitted traits are linked to social characteristics. For instance, in North America and apartheid south Africa, racism dictated that that different "races" should be segregated from one another, that they should have their own distinct communities, develop their own institutions such as churches, and hospitals and that it was unnatural for members of two "separate races" to intermarry.

Racism refers to prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against a person or people on the basis of their membership in a particular racial or ethnic group, typically one that is a minority or marginalized.

Gilmore defines racism as "the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death, (247).

Slavery- The 1926 slavery convention reads: "Slavery is the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership is exercised" (1). Slavery is the practice of forced labour and restricted liberty.

Slavery according to *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* is "condition in which one human being is owned by another. A slave was considered in Law as property, or chattel, as deprived of the rights ordinarily held by free person". (874) Slavery has existed in various forms throughout the world history. Slaves were obtained in a number of ways. Most often enslavement was involuntary being achieved by such procedures as capture in war, kidnapping, or slave raiding; punishment for criminal acts; payment for debt; direct sale by one's parent, guardian, or chieftain; or transfer of ownership from one master to another.

A Brief Biography of LeRoi Jones

Amiri Baraka was born Everett LeRoi Jones in 1934 in Newark, New Jersey. He adopted the Musliri name Imarnu Amear Baraka in 1967 which he later changed to Amiri Baraka. He has written over 40 pieces of works. These consist of plays, poems, essays, music history and criticisms. Some of which are: *Blues People* (1999), *Somebody Blew up America* (2004) and *Transbluecency* (1996). He was largely influenced in life by Malcolm X and Richard Wright (author). He studied at Rutgers University in 1951. In 1952 he then went on to study at Columbia University and the New School for Social Research. He did not obtain a degree at any of the universities mentioned. In 1954 he went on to join the US Air force as a gunner and rank of Sargent. During the same year, he moved to Greenwich Village and worked in a warehouse for music records. It was there where he discovered the Avant Garde beat generation and became highly interested in Jazz. Baraka is a political activist and has lectured in Europe, the Caribbean, Africa and the USA regarding cultural and political issues. Baraka is renowned as the founder of the Black Arts Movement in Harlem in the 1960s. Most of his central themes range from Black Liberation and White Racism, political and cultural oppression and domination, slavery, African-American citizenship and identity, the enthronement of and respect for the African-American personality, equality, culture, and history amongst others. He died on 9th January, 2014.

Synopsis of *Dutchman*

Dutchman is a two act play written in 1965. In Act One, the action focuses exclusively on Lula, a white woman and Clay, a black man, who both ride on the subway in New York City. Lula boards the train eating an apple, an allusion to Biblical Eve. The characters engage in a long, flirtatious conversation throughout the train ride. Lula sits down next to Clay. She accuses him of staring at her buttocks. She ignores his denials and uses stereotype to correctly guess where he lives, where he is going, what Clay's

Mend; Warren, looks and talks. Clay is shocked by her apparent knowledge of his past and says that she must be a Mend of Warren.

Lula is glad that Clay is so easy to manipulate and puts her hand on his leg. She offers him apple and tells he to invites her to the party he is going to. Clay is gladdened by Lula's apparent liking for him and maintains a hopeful attitude to having sex together. However, he does not push his hope into her and waits for Lula to make the offer first. Lula is angry with Clay's not falling for her manipulative tactics. She switches strategies and mocks Clay's Anglo-American Speech, his college education and his three-buttom suit. She derides his being black and passive. She dances mockingly in an R&B style and tells Clay her problem and "do the nasty Rub bellies". Clay, who refuses initially, eventually grabs her and throws her down. Clay accuses Lula of knowing nothing but "Luxury". He slaps her twice and tells her to leave him alone.

Clay launches into a monologue. He explains these segregatory action assuage black Americans' anger towards white and distract them from accessing the "white man's intellectual legacy". Clay states that if Black people stopped trying to heal their pain through dance music, civic participation, religion, or focusing on moving upwards in American society, and became coldly rational like white people, black people would just kill all the whites and be done with racism in America. Clay says that if he were to take Lula's words to heart, he should just kill all the white people he meets. Although, Clay says all this, lie deeply rejects this plan of action. He states that he does not want to kill and that he prefers to be ignorant of the problem. He says he would rather choose to pretend to be ignorant of racism not trying to get rid of it by fighting with Whites.

Immediately after Clay's long monologue, Lula changes strategy again. Clay makes as if to leave, but Lula stabs him twice to the heart. She directs all the other passengers, Blacks and Whites, in the train to throw his body out and get out at the next stop. The play ends with Lula looking towards another young black man who board and occupy the empty train.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is antiracism. Antiracism is an active approach to combating racism at the individual, social, institutional, as well as structural level. In other words, it is the practice of actively identifying and opposing racism. The goal of antiracism is actively change policies, behaviours, and beliefs that perpetuate racist ideals and actions. It is a strong belief or doctrine that rejects the supremacy of one racial group over another and promotes racial equality in society. It is the movement of resistance. Therefore, the authors are motivated for this study for the fact that, Clay who symbolizes the black race is highly against racism and slavery being practice by Lula, who symbolizes the white man.

Textual Analysis of *Dutchman*

In espousing the plot of the play, Clay and Lula and characters expose the hypocrisy and inherent contradictions in the American social fabric. On his own part. Clay can be said to symbolize the struggle for identity formation and the construction of acceptable citizenship; as well as the restoration of the erstwhile decimated manhood and personality of the African-American. These are achieved in Clay's final denouncement of his long-standing romance with white America, especially his obsession with the white Caucasian woman. Clay tells Lula: I mean if I murdered you, then other white people would begin to understand me --- if Bessie Smith had killed some white people she wouldn't have needed that music. She could have talked very straight and plain about the world. No Metaphor. No grunts --- Money, Power, Luxury. Crazy Niggers turning their backs on sanity. When all it needs is that simple act, Murder. Just murder! Would make us all sane. LeRoi (1965:230).

Dramatically, the above monologue represents the voice of rejuvenated Clay who finally discovers himself, and asserts his full identity through the recognition of what he is, that culminates in the eventual overthrow of the yoke of oppression in the name of racisim and slavery. The play, therefore, can be perceived from the

point of view of the tragedy of a young that has suddenly been exhumed from the graveyard of oppression to relieve him, but gets cut down in the twilight of his age. By this singular act, Clay dies a victim of an ambition of becoming a man and a citizen. In this role, Clay, the representative or archetypal African-American middle class, gets entrapped in the annihilating allurement of the white world and its value that he is unable to repudiate them.

Dutchman presents both Clay and Lula as racial archetypes that end up transforming into prototypes at the end of the play. Significantly, Clay's tirade is the only serious dramatic action that is precipitated by tension which eventually culminates in his death. It is this tragic action of Clay's death that transforms both Clay and Lula into racial prototypes, with Clay emerging both as the protagonist and victim, while Lula, the assumed antagonist, on the other hand becomes the oppressor, murderer and villain.

In Taddeus Martin's essay entitled, "Dutchman Reconsidered", Lula is presented as "the symbol of all the arrogance inherent in whiteness and as such, embodies all its trappings" perhaps this explains why despite Clay's outbursts, Lula still tells him that he cannot escape his heritage of slavery; neither can she be free of her heritage of oppression. This assertion unabashedly portrays her as representing the boisterous and murderous American system that excludes her minority groups from being full members of the mainstream community. To be candid, Lula epitomizes America with its trappings; the America that seeks to lure Black people into her dungeon of destruction having cuckolded them into her novel. This prompts some critics to assert that "Lula is too crazy, extreme, and neurotic", to which Baraka responds as reported by Gibson: You remember America, don't you, where they have unsolved murders happening before your eyes on television? How crazy, extreme, neurotic, does that sound? Lula, for all her alleged insanity, just barely reflects the insanity of this hideous place (Gibson 1970:210).

For his failure to annihilate the 'white thing' Clay becomes an inexorable victim of murder. Again, for failing to murder Lula, Gibson reasons that Clay "chooses instead to stay in his insanity, to

deny his blackness, to deny the murder that would Giberate him" (209).

LeRoi Jones was a social activist who revolted against racism, slavery, national oppression, colonialism, neo-colonialism amongst others. He believed that: "The theatre must be an institution for bringing change... Black theatre must be a school for teaching light morality, for inspiring black people to move, for Self-Determination, Self-Respect and Self-Defense" (15).

The above assertion brings to the fore James Baldwin's fury against the inherent contradictions in American society as quoted in Amirikpa Oyigbenu's, *Racism, Citizenship and Identity Politics in African-American Drama*, thus: To be born in free society and not be born free is to be born into a lie. To be told by co-citizens and co-Christians that you have no value, no history have never done anything that is worthy of human respect destroys you because in the beginning you belief it many Negroes die believed it (Amirikpa 2013:92).

Oyigbenu again avers that LeRoi Jones's "theatre, therefore, is to destroy the myth that has been propagated and believed in certain quarters, of the African-American people (92).

Baraka makes psychological and social observations about the essential nature of the man's existence in America. This is expressed in the play symbolically and dramatically through the relationships between Black (Clay) and White (Lula) and the pattern of American life. This is demonstrated in the below excerpt: … the man looks idly up, until he sees a woman's face staring at him through the window, when it realizes that the man has noticed the face, it begins very premeditatedly to smile. The man smiles too, for a moment, without a trace of selfconsciousness almost an instinctive though undesirable response. Then the kind of awkwardness or embarrassment sets in, and the make a look away, is further embarrassed, so he brings back his eyes to where the face was... (Amirikpa 2013:4).

Clay is astonished as Lula seems to have great ideal about him. He says "hey, you still haven't told me how you know so much about me" (12). She says that he is merely a well-known

type, the black man who has racial identity but to adopt a white culture. Clay assumes the appearance and manners of the whites. This act further exposes Whites as vulnerable and potential victims of their own creation-racism. Thus: **Lula:** ...we'll pretend ... that you are free of your own history. And I am free of my history. We'll pretend that we are both anonymous beauties smashing along through the city's entrails (LeRoi 1965:21).

Lula tries to seduce Clay, but he rejects her advances politely. She insults, embarrasses and humiliates him. She becomes aggressive towards Clay. She blames him for repudiating his identity. She added that Clay oppresses himself within a culture and tradition that does not recognize him as a human being. This is captured in Lula's words: **Lula:** ... Boy, those narrow shoulder cloths come from a tradition you ought to feel oppressed by... What right do you have to be wearing a three-button suit and suit and stupid tie? Your grandfather was a slave, he didn't go Harvard (LeRoi 1965:18).

In the same vein, Oyigbenu posits that:… Clay finds himself inextricably in fashion that is reminiscent.., of the slave master... But Lula on the other hand takes Clay up on seemingly duality and hypocrisy whose attend ant con sequences are multidimensional... it seeks to transport Clay back to the past of slave era where he is presently the substitution of the identity of the slave master... Clay's father was a slave, he could not have gone to Harvard because 1-larvard is a citadel of white civilization and learning… the three-button Jacket evinces a metaphor of an oppressive tradition of the slave master to which clay does not belong (Amirikpa 2013:119).

Another instance that shows Clay's position as a slave is in the conversation between Lula and Clay. Thus:

Lula: And who did you think you were?
Who do you think you are now?

Clay: Well, in college I thought I was Baudelaire.
But I've slowed down since

Lula: I bet you never once thought you were a Black nigger... a black Baudelaire

Clay: that's right (LeRoi 1965:19)

However, Clay wants to have an awareness of his position in a society that judges him by the colour of his skin. Lula could release Clay if her love for him was true, yet it is difficult to have a normal love relationship between a white woman and black man. Therefore, the playwright believes that such redeeming love is a failure. Instead, there is a slave master relationship, hostility and racial hatred.

Lula cannot be free from her heritage of oppression. She represents the racist whose reactions according to Sandra "... are mere emblems of the materialistic technological inducements which a western capitalist and patriarchal society hold out to men of color in its drive to subjugate them" (235).

Clay who is repressed in the stifling society goes underground to preserve his integrity. LeRoi Jones exposes the guilt-ridden American white society and the anger of the Black American society. Similarly, an acceptance of the idea of the superiority of the white man is another aspect of the slave mentality. Therefore, Clay tries to recover his African culture with the growing sense of black power and anger. Being provoked, he challenges Lula by expressing his authentic self:

> It is the black man's responsibility to preserve
> Himself and prevent white society from
> Converting its racism into over criminality (LeRoi 1965:32).

Clay realizes his responsibility as black in white dominated society. He is the victim and Lula is the oppressor, she represents the voice of White America who passes judgment on him. She acts as composite role as a witness judge and jury, Clay is found guilty and is executed. This further explains the authorial voice in the play, who frown at racial segregation and inhuman treatment as portrayed in *Dutchman*. In scene two, Clay becomes more deviant, and in a fit of anger, reveals his hatred for her and all the whites. He tells her that his three-button suit is a disguise to keep him from cutting the white man's throat:

> CLAY: And I sit here, in this buttoned-up suit, To keep myself from cutting all your throat (LeRoi 1965:33).

Judging from the above excerpt, it is crystal clear that Clay who deserts his disguise and language as would be white man becomes a dangerous and powerful rebel. Lula stabs him to death with a small knife, She orders the other passengers who her allies representing the racist society to get rid of his body. "open the door and throw his body out" (37). Lula carries a book which symbolizes the written culture of the white man. Donald P. Costello says that Lula, "Is of course, America, especially, white liberal America who interferes with the black man, who professes friendship as it murders" (213).

This message is conveyed to show the agonized tense life of a Black man in a white man's world and to warn the Blacks against the genocidal attitudes of the Whites. There is cultural-racial injustice. The play stresses the conflict between two hostile visions. The white culture is guilty of opposing and exploiting the black minority.

Finally, it is no mistake, therefore, that the play under study have this thematic pre-occupation as central to the discourse on Racism and Slavery as portrayed in *Dutchman*. However, Clay epitomizes the struggle for self-determination, self- assertiveness, freedom and democratic citizenship as full members of their political and geographical community. The playwright calls for a society where it is possible for whites and blacks to be equal.

Conclusion

This paper has shown to some extent, the study of racism and slavery in LeRoi Jones's *Dutchman*. Also, it discusses African-American experiences in America, as a racist society where racism is a phenomenon the Blacks try to alter. There is still a tone of hope at the end of everything because the Whites' effort to oppress African-Americans fails. Therefore, the Blacks never stopped in their protest to be treated as humans. They tried to make their impact felt in the society.

The theory adopted for this research is antiracism. The characters, Clay and Lula are presented as racial archetypes that ends up transforming into prototypes. The paper has shown that, the monologue which is the representation of the voice of rejuvenated Clay who ultimately discovers himself, and asserts his full identity through the recognition of what he is, that culminates in the eventual overthrow of the yoke of oppressession in the name of racism and slavery is capable of bringing mortality and morbidity. Clay represents black while Lula represents white.

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