

ECHOING CASCADES

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**A STUDY ON AFRO-SURREALISM IN AMIRI
BARAKA'S SELECT POEMS: PREFACE TO A
TWENTY VOLUME SUICIDE NOTE,
LEGACY AND KA' BA**

A. MONIKA

John Locke describes the mind as 'a tabula rasa', an empty slate, that is filled by experiences. The experiences then get transformed into thought, knowledge and memory. Human consciousness is gradually haunted by the memories of human experiences, attaining new forms and reflecting the gradual process of existence, enhancing the quality of life. This involves the inculcation of past, present and future experiences as past influences the present and present influences the future. Being associated with the interlinked flow of time, a conscious human mind has a free flow of thoughts and expressions, knowingly or unknowingly, which in certain cases becomes the outlet or relief for the beings. This free flow of expression is found in many literary writings. The paper focuses on one such literature, namely African American literature, in which the lived experiences of the blacks, the fusion of past, present and future and haunting memories play a predominant role. The paper studies the aspects of Afro-Surrealism, a literary and cultural aesthetics of African American literature, in the selected poems of Amiri Baraka.

African American literature dates back to African slaves' earliest arrival in the New World, when they forged a language and literature of their own. At the heart of this body of work lies the African American vernacular tradition. Oral forms of expression existed prior to the African Slaves' abilities to read and write in the English language, which included sacred elements such as spirituals, gospel, and sermons – offering images of a just God who would deliver vengeance upon the oppressive slave owners and salvation upon those who suffered under slavery and also included secular forms such as the blues, jazz, work songs and rhymes, rap, sermons, and folktales, detailing the emotional anguish associated with being black and dispossessed, by virtue of race and class in white America. The sacred elements which emerged on the southern slave

plantation in the 19th century gave way to the secular forms in the 20th century. They were the forms of expressing the realities of their daily lives in America, which often included coded or secret messages of enduring the ills of slavery. The vernacular tradition of African Americans informs African American literature of slavery and freedom. Major themes of the period were resistance to tyranny and dedication to human dignity. African American authors during this period questioned the institution of slavery as they became increasingly familiar with the teachings of the Holy Bible. The writers equated literacy with freedom and with their growing literacy, they appealed to the traditional Christian doctrine of a universal brotherhood of humanity as a way of challenging the morality of slavery.

The conditions of slavery enhanced a certain genre of writing called Slave Narratives. During late 19th and 20th centuries, Jim Crow policies led to enormous discrimination and violence in the South. The Civil War ended in the early 20th century, rising hopes for a more egalitarian future, which was quickly dimmed with the rise of Jim Crow laws in the American South. Yet novelists still produced some of the most notable works of fiction in the collective history. Harlem Renaissance is a movement centered in New York city's Harlem neighborhood. Glorious works arose from this movement in 1920s. Then arises the Civil Rights Movement, which took root in fiction of the mid - 20th century. And in the recent decades, significant female voices have emerged strongly on the literary scene, including Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. Among the vast and varied literature, involving enormous movements, theoretical perspectives, narratives and writings, there is a literary and cultural aesthetic called Afro-Surrealism, which is a response to mainstream surrealism, in order to reflect the lived experience of people of colour. Surrealism is a 20th century avant-garde cultural movement that began in the early 1920s, in art and literature which sought to release the creative potential of the unconscious mind, for example by the irrational juxtaposition of images. The preceding movement of surrealism, according to a manifesto by Andre Breton merges reality with fantasy to create "a kind of superior reality" (Breton 21).

The term Afro-Surrealism was first coined by Amiri Baraka himself, on whose works the study focusses. In an introduction to prophet Henry Dumas' 1974 book *Ark of Bones and Other Stories*, Amiri Baraka puts forth a term for what he describes as Dumas' "Skill at creating an entire different world organically connected to this one... the Black aesthetic in its actual contemporary and lived life". Baraka had named what Dumas had seen. In his manifesto, D. Scott Miller explains that Surrealism and Afro-Futurism are not Afro-Surreal. Leopold Senghor, poet, first president of Senegal and African Surrealist made the distinction between European Surrealism and African Surrealism, saying that the former is empirical whereas the latter is mystical and metaphorical. The root for 'Afro' is from 'Afro-Asiatic' meaning a shared language between black, brown, and Asian peoples of the world. Afro-Surrealism is about the present, being denoted as 'Future-past', which is 'Right Now', which is considered to be the past of the future. Though Afro-Surrealism is not for Futurism, the term 'Future-past' is highlighted to bring out the culmination of past, present and future and also to underline the significance of influences of past in the American History. The concept of 'alien-familiar' is characterised in the elements of Afro-Surrealism, which implies the alienated situation of the familiarity of the Africans. The familiarity of the black people is not to be realised, making them grow far and distant with each other and even with themselves. 'Black is Beautiful' is one of the main ideas of Negritude, which is emphasized by Afro-Surrealism. The name Afro-Surrealism denotes the hybrid style, taking the pre-existing tradition of Surrealism from the 1920s and politicising it by adding the prefix 'Afro', signifying the process of rewriting the history (of the people) in the context of African American literature. Surrealism is beyond/above reality and Afro-Surrealism is an intensified reality.

The founder of the term Afro-Surrealism, Amiri Baraka is an African-American poet, critic, civil rights activist and scholar. Formerly he was Le Roi Jones and was born in Newark, New Jersey on October 7, 1934. After serving three years in the U.S Air Force, he joined the Beat movement in Greenwich village. After the assassination of Malcolm X, he took the name Amiri Baraka and became involved in the Black Nationalist poetry and literature scenes. He later identified himself as

Marxist. In 1968, he became a Muslim and added the prefix 'Imamu' meaning 'spiritual leader', which was later dropped by him in 1974. His writing is controversial and he has often polarised readers with his aggressive and incendiary style. He had penned more than fifty books, including fiction, criticism on music, essays, short stories, poetry and plays. His poems are vivid depicting the inner agony of the Black people. The selected poems of this study support in bringing out the features of Afro-Surrealism in Baraka's writings.

In *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide*, the speaker seems to be accustomed to the regularity of the day-to-day routine life, which engenders a literary death wish. Through the personal note of speaker's daughter's death wish, the poem reflects the mind of the Black society, in which people undergo the torment of 'lived' experiences in their day-to-day lives. The word 'lived' emphasizes the painful experiences of the Blacks, to which no other pain can be compared as equal, setting a mark in African American literature. The diction of the poem explores the Black people's free flow of pain, which is fixed in their regular minds. The emptiness and hopelessness in their everyday lived experiences are reflected in the verse:

"And now, each night I count the stars,
And each night I get the same number.
And when they will not come to be counted,
I count the holes they leave."

The present agony of the Blacks is not dissociated from their past ancient myth. Music and songs are the important elements of African culture and history. The author brings out the implications of Music and singing in the present regular life of the Blacks through the lines:

"Each time I go out to walk the dog.
Or the broad edged silly music the wind
Makes when I run for a bus..." and
"Nobody sings anymore"

Despite its dislocation and political stasis, the poem ends with a positive note of faith, as the girl kneels and prays with her clasped hands.

The poem *Legacy* depicts the exhausted state of the Blacks, being homeless, moving from place to place, hoping for the best, but ending again as the same 'Blacks'. The invisible and unconscious state of the victims are portrayed in the poetic lines which depict the image of a drunkard.

"....., sleeping against
the drugstore, growling under
the trucks and stoves, stumbling
through and over the cluttered eyes
of early mysterious night. Frowning
drunk waving moving a hand or lash.
Dancing Kneeling reaching out, letting
a hand rest in shadows. Squatting
to drink or pee....."

The victims are helpless, being unable to decide whether to drink or pee. The words used here bring out the horrible state of those victims, who do not have a socially accepted standard and authentic existence. They undergo a state of transmission from euphoria to confusion. Embedded with old beliefs and memories: 'early mysterious night', '(the old songs lead you to believe)', they move hopelessly from place to place, hoping to attain the place of the whites, perceiving it as the New World. But their new world is not devoid of their past:

".....Riding out
from this town to another, where
it is also black."

African American literature is for rewriting history, politicising the life of Black Americans. Afro-Surrealism proves itself as being politicised. Even in the practices of African religion, they had their African motif mending with their new Christian beliefs. Miller's epigraph: 'Black is the new Black' is evident here in this poem through the victim's process of action in seeking home as they wander around in the streets with confusions.

The poem *Ka' Ba* explores the ongoing issues of Black people. The Blacks are forced against their will and they are imprisoned, being denied of their rights, which is depicted metaphorically: "A Closed window looks down on a dirty courtyard." The poem beautifies the world of the African though there is suffering and killing. It asserts that Blacks are beautiful with their African imaginations and their identities:

"We are beautiful people
with African imaginations
full of masks and dances and swelling chants
with African eyes, and arms
tho we sprawl in gray chains in a place
full of winters, when what we want is sun."

These lines of *Ka' Ba*, put forth the cults of ancient Africa to the readers through the imagery - 'full of masks', 'dances', 'swelling chants', which are reimagined in the present. Though the beauty of the Blacks is appreciated, it is not fully recognised as there is a want of new hope like 'Sun'. The Blacks seem to get alienated from the familiarity of their society because of their fondness towards Newness. They remain unknown to themselves and also to others amid their familiarity. The poem insists of the Black people's new correspondence with themselves and their Black family and their need for magic and spells to rise up, return, destroy, and create.

The aspect of 'Right Now' is found common in all the three selected poems. The present tormenting experiences, with the haunting past are brought out in all the three poems. The regular flow of thoughts is found among the poetic lines, which is both painful and acceptable. In all the selected poems, inspite of the familiar tone of the Blacks, as portrayed by the author, the feeling of alienation is being felt by them, as though they were distant and strange from the others. As the poems are studied, the readers get the feeling of learning and exploring the new, unknown experiences. The Blacks and their life and history always remain vast and mysterious, a realm to be explored, with the quest widening the pace for various theoretical, critical, cultural and aesthetic perspectives to be studied and experimented and also to be enhanced.

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