

# Amiri Barka and Countee Cullen as Revolutionary Writers: A Close Reading in Selected Literary Works<sup>1</sup>

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DOI:10.37648/ijrssh.v13i01.031

Received: 14 January 2023; Accepted: 13 February 2023; Published: 06 March 2023

Despite the fact that Amiri Barka is well-known for being a dramatist whereas Countee Cullen is a poet, both have one thing in common which is their love and passion to defend and glorify their black heritage along with reviving their historical background in poetry and drama. Firstly, Amiri Barka in his play *The Dutchman*, presents an image about the American society when a black man and a white woman meet in a train and their meeting and conversation ends up in an unexpected way i.e. by the murder of the black man. The play opens with two characters who are talking and then their discussion turns into a fight that ends with the death of the man who is killed by the white woman. After that the body of the black man is concealed by the persons in the wagon as they are ordered by the killer. So the purpose behind writing the play is considered a revolutionary one that agitated the black people against the injustice practiced by the white men in American society at the time against minorities. "I see art as a weapon and a weapon of revolution" LeRoi Jones, a poet, dramatist, essayist, political activist, and music critic, was the founder of the Black Arts Repertory Theater. He is one of the most influential and controversial American writers of the last two centuries. For the dramatist, the literary works produced by him as a gifted and talented writer should be used for a noble cause. Therefore, Amiri Barka or LeRoi Jones invested and dedicated his works to reflect the plight of the black people in the American society as minorities. Black people were enslaved by the white for a long time and even after gaining their freedom they were treated inferiorly by them. White people consider themselves superior to the black race and always treated them inferiorly. The African American suffered for decades and then they claimed their rights in addition to reflect their agony and torment in literature, cinema, and all kind of media to tell the world about the suffering they underwent. In the play, we have a black man killed by white woman and white people witnessed this crime but they end up by getting rid of the body like a carcass of any animal of no importance. *Dutchman* was derived from the playwright's experience as a student at Rutgers University and then the African American Howard University (Bigsby15). This taught him a lot about racial discrimination and the black people's attempt to imitate the white people in order to escape feeling as a minor race in their racial community. Historically speaking, the play is important because it echoes the racist struggle of the 1960s America when it was written and produced. The black people were either to accept integration in this white-dominated society and endure inhuman and unjust treatment or to revolt and face violence and inevitable deaths.

The play is also significant because of its portrayal of a challenging image of black American identity. The American audience was accustomed to see the black people as primitive African savages, or as characters employed to entertain the whites by singing and dancing or by other menial means of entertainment. In *Blues People*, Jones discusses the image of the Negro as a "wild savage" and a comic figure for white American people. "As the image of the Negro in America was given more basic human qualities, e.g., the ability to feel pain, perhaps the only consistent way of justifying what had been done to him- now that he had reached what can be called a post-bestial stage-was to demonstrate the ridiculousness of his inability to act as a "normal" human being. American Negroes were much funnier than Africans" Amiri Baraka. The title of the play, *Dutchman*, is chosen to emphasize the major theme in the

<sup>1</sup> How to cite the article: Saeed A.am., Amiri Barka and Countee Cullen as Revolutionary Writers: A Close Reading in Selected Literary Works, *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities*, Jan-Mar 2023, Vol 13, Issue 1, 373-376, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.37648/ijrssh.v13i01.031>

play- racial discrimination. Many critics agree that the title bears mythical and allegorical implications. The Dutch were the first to bring slaves in vessels to America. The famous legend of the Flying Dutchman tells of a ship cursed to sail the seas eternally and absurdly without being able to find a final destination or a safe harbor. In the play, the train represents the cursed ship moving in an endless voyage.

Lula stands for the cursed crew of the ship and, in the play. She represents the white Americans who because of their inhuman treatment of the blacks were doomed to face a fate similar to that of the Dutch who were responsible for the blacks 'suffering and their servitude'. Jones himself says that "Lula is America, or at least its spirit". The passengers, in the train, represent the passive individuals in the society who accept racial prejudice and violence and even participate in social injustice and dehumanization. This is obvious in Lula's commands to them after killing Clay and their passive obedience: "Get this man off me! Hurry, now! [The others come and drag Clay's body down the aisle]. Open the door and throw his body out. [They throw him off]. And all of you get off at the next stop". This shows that racial discrimination is the dominant factor in the society, and Lula is very powerful only because of her white race. Throughout the play, Lula is critical of Clay's assimilative nature and even says that he is dying because of his assimilation: "What right do you have to be wearing a three-button suit and striped tie?" she asks. "Your grandfather was a slave, he didn't go to Harvard" (Dutchman, p.2306). She says that she knows many things about him because he is the "well-known type" of the racially and socially ambitious black lot. She is able to recognize his common type through his bourgeois suit, style of speech, and pretentious manners. She rebukes him saying that his white fashioned suit and adoption of white people's manners and life style is a mask that will not conceal his black identity. She even tries to reawake him from his self-denial sarcastically: " LULA. [Mocking him. in wild dance] Be cool. Be cool. That's all you know . . . 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 and scream at these people. Like scream meaningless shit in these hopeless faces. Clay. Clay, you go! I break out. Don'! there dying the way they want you to die. Get up (Dutchman. p.231 1, Italics mine). "

LULA. You're a murderer. Clay. and you know it. [Her voice darkening with significance] You know goddamn well what I mean. CLAY. I do? (Dutchman, p.2307).

Clay believes that through his racial assimilation his color and identity will be worthless. He struggles with his own identity. Still, his ultimate violent reaction is a justified rage in the face of Lula's racist oppression. (Devon 22) The white people all the time not only treated the blacks as inferior creatures, but they even planted deeply in the mind of them that they won't be able to live a respected life only by imitating the white superior life. As a result, they planted deeply in their minds "inferiority complex" and blacks in return were torn out between two edges their heritage and the white's culture which eventually caused the black's identity crisis and led to their destruction like the protagonist of the play, the victim of the white woman.

Secondly, Countee Cullen - 1903-1946 in his poem "From the Dark Tower" which was published in Countee Cullen's second collection of poetry, *Copper Sun*, in 1927 tackles the plight of the Africans during slavery hard times. The poem opens with "we shall not" which indicates rejection and a rebel against slavery and Black's exploitation for centuries. During the Harlem renaissance, many writers like Hughes and Cullen devoted themselves and their literary talent to serve a noble cause which is the appropriate reflection of their race. The black race has been oppressed, smashed, and distorted by the superior white race. The poet did not state his poetic intention clearly rather he implicitly sands against all the constrains imposed upon his race for along years that agonized them. For him, time is due to call their rights back and put an end to all kinds of humiliation and underestimation, they went through. Historically speaking, the white colonizers colonized the black continent and brought their citizens as slaves in containers to America and Europe to be used as tools for servitude in their homeland. They planted deep in the mind of the black people what Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* – first published in 1952 called "inferiority complex" to enslave them physically and spiritually "The feeling or the belief that the blackness is barbaric, uncivilized, and inferior in the world ruled by the white has been internalized within the black as a given reality resulted from agenda of internalization from colonizers and their ideology within the colonial areas to maintain their rule over their colonies "(Fanon 35). As a result, the blacks were deluded and unaware of their human rights so they worked hard, served, and obeyed blindly in America as servants and second-class citizens. The Harlem emerged as a reaction when the new black generation realized that only the black people can call for their rights back and restore their dignity by themselves from "the detrimental impacts of colonialism" (Fanon 76). From the *Dark Tower* is one of the literary works that calls for freedom from all deeply rooted complexes of chains that has been developed by the white race. He stands against all norms of slavery practiced severely upon them. He uses the pronoun "We" in the opening line, representing Black

race collectively. Stating that they won't be used as tools to serve the white lazy people who are sleeping and enjoying their luxurious life at the expense of the crippled black people. They used to plant in the fields and work day and night silently. They even worked for free without getting any wages. In return the white masters enjoying "The golden increment of bursting fruit".

We shall not always plant while others reap

The golden increment of bursting fruit,

Not always countenance, abject and mute,

That lesser men should hold their brothers cheap;

Not everlastingly while others sleep (Collen 1-5).

The poet rejects the identity effacement against the black race who were "mute" and "abject". They are leaving all the bad experience behind and moving ahead towards their freedom claiming their usurped rights back. The bitter and harsh circumstances of slavery and racism created "trauma" in the subconscious of the Africans (Fanon74) due to all kinds of violence and pain they have been through. Black people kept suppressing their hatred inwardly under their inferiority complex and keep acting and talking as the inferior to the superior white owners till they become aware of their value in life and faced all injustices exercised upon them as the poet describes in the poem "Not everlastingly". In the octave, Cullen says that nothing lasts ever after and life changes. The suffering of his fellow citizen will end and black people will become aware of their rights in life to be equal with other races. Also, the black race has endured brutal doings and they had to bend and subjugate publicly for decades without being treated humanely but "not always". They recognized that they deserve to live and appreciated by others. They won't cry nor treated brutally like animals used for servitude. They used to "bend" and subjugate to their masters but this scenario is over "not eternally".

Shall we beguile their limbs with mellow flute,

Not always bend to some more subtle brute;

We were not made to eternally weep (Collen6-8).

The poet is optimistic as he and his fellow citizens are leaving the awful past times and embracing the future life freely in the sense that they won't be crippled anymore nor shed tears and taken advantage over by any one. They have the right to live equally in life. The darkness of their life came to an end and the ray of hope enlighten their destiny. In *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft and his companions refer clearly to the idea of "writing back" that the equation has been reversed and the colonized are writing as a way to fight back and correct the falls image drawn about them by the white colonizers. Therefore, the poem is a cry of protest and a way of resistance. "Language becomes the medium through which conceptions of "truth", "order", and "reality" become established. Such power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice. For this reason, the discussion of post-colonial writing by which the language, with its power, and the writing, with its signification of authority, has been wrested from the dominant European culture" (Ashcroft 54).

The night whose sable breast relieves the stark,

White stars is no less lovely being dark,

And there are buds that cannot bloom at all

In light, but crumple, piteous, and fall;

So, in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds,

And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds (Collen9-14).

In the sestet the idea of “darkness” is described proudly by the poet and related even to life and hope. They used to be looked down upon due to their skin complexion but not anymore. Darkness which is usually interpreted in terms of decay and death is the reason behind blooming some buds that light would kill them usually. Metaphorically speaking, light not always useful and productive in the case of those buds it is fatal, the poet implicitly criticizing the white race who spoiled the life of the black people like these buds. He again praises the black heritage and proud of it despite all misrepresentations throughout ages as he emphasizes the idea that they are the source of life for others and their agony will come to an end. Despite they are black their souls are pure and beautiful. In the last two lines the idea of temporary suffering and agony is repeated and the inevitable change is coming. Finally, the poem is not only a reflection of the black’s terrible experience with slavery and racism rather it is a “cultural re-thinking” about the Africans’ heritage.

**Financial Support and Sponsorship:** Nil

**Conflict of Interest:** None

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