Chapter VI

Conclusion

On the basis of what the foregoing chapters have dealt with it is appropriate to draw certain conclusions about the assumptions with which the study began. The basic and central assumption is that African-American nationalism which came into prominence in the 1960s has been an integral part of the African-American literary tradition and of the ongoing struggle of the Blacks for freedom and equality. It is true, however, that the tradition has faced periodically with certain ruptures, but it has shown signs of recuperation with renewed forms of revisionary nationalism at every moment of rupture. Since the beginning of the slave trade there have always been attempts to express forms of protest but these protests could not be properly articulated in the absence of a supporting literature.

The notion of Black nationalism in America initially took forms of politically motivated movements and was expressed in the people's natural urge for reunion after the familial and spiritual dislocation during slavery. Therefore it is difficult to define the notion in clear terms. What initially appeared to be a natural urge for reunion with the families developed slowly and systematically into an orchestrated protest against various forms of oppression and finally became a militant form of assertion of the strength and power of "blackness" as a clear opposition to "white mythologies." The Black Aesthetic of the 1960s is the culmination of such a process. The African-American nationalism of the 1960s does not acknowledge the condition of the physical boundaries necessary for the spirit of nationalism; it emphasizes that Blacks throughout the world dispersed through phases of diaspora share the same fate and, therefore, are unified through this spirit of nationalism. This nationalism is a cumulative

product of years of struggle for self-expression undertaken by blacks to assert their historic role in the evolution of a consciousness for an egalitarian form of society.

The present African-American community is neither bound by a common religion nor a common political ideology. But they share with each other almost subliminally the spirit of nationalism that is different from the one they share with the white population in the United States. This spirit is Pan-American, almost global, and has affinity with what the other oppressed people in the world feel toward each other. One of the important ways through which this nationalism is articulated is language. All the four playwrights covered in this study deviated significantly from the established conventions of English. In fact writers like Baraka and Ntozake Shange drastically changed the written form of English and experimented with various typographical styles appropriate to their natural forms of expressions. Playwrights like Ed Bullins, Sonia Sanchez, and Shange and August Wilson followed these stylistic innovations. Shange went even further in her attempts to subvert the traditional hierarchical structure of English by discarding marks of punctuation and employing instead slashes to separate words. These modes of linguistic experimentation should not be taken as stylistic gimmicks; on the contrary, they constitute a way of countering the oppressive mode of representation employed by the whites through their strategy of homogenization. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has made a case for such innovations in African-American writing as a process of "signifying" the quintessential spirit of the Blacks.

While African-American poets and fiction writers had limitations in reaching out to their people, the playwrights had certain advantages. They could talk to their audiences directly and elicit their response during the course of the production. Thus the playwright and his/her audience could participate in a meaningful dialogue and establish a commonality of interest. Although African-American playwrights have been writing and producing plays for more than

a century, the New Black Theatre in the sixties provided such a platform and the playwright could combine art and politics successfully. Although the four playwrights included in this study differed from one another temperamentally and dealt with the theme of blackness with varying degrees of emphasis, they exploited theatre as a means to raise the collective consciousness of the African-American community. Baraka was an angry playwright and therefore his early plays like *Dutchman*, *The Slave*, *The Toilet* and *The Baptism* (all produced in 1964) shocked and stunned the audiences, especially the white audiences, with their use of overt violence, obscenity and blasphemy. Baraka accused both the white liberals and the black bourgeoisie of perpetuating racism in America. Although he has been denounced as an anti-white militant and a second rate playwright, a close look at his plays would reveal that these accusations are misdirected and biased. As an exponent of black aesthetics, Baraka used his plays to convey to both the whites and the Blacks the message that Blacks have contributed to the mosaics of American culture as much as the whites have done and therefore deserve to be studied properly.

Thus the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s which ushered in African-American nationalism is a highly significant event. Its contribution to the process of raising the consciousness of the Blacks in America is immense. It made the leaders of the community realize the fact that art and politics could be complementary to each other. It also prepared the ground for the playwrights in the subsequent decades. For example, in the preface to his *Three Plays*, August Wilson expresses his indebtedness, among other influences, to the playwrights of Black Arts Movement:

> I could not have accomplished any of this if the black playwrights working in the sixties had not laid the groundwork. Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, Philip Hays Dean, Richard Wesly, and Ron Milner are but a few of those who were particularly vocal. I have an

> enormous respect for their talents and work and I place myself in that long line of the tradition of African-American letters that has nurtured us all. (xii)

The quest for cultural identity was the most prominent and strongest motive behind the emergence of the Black Arts Movement in the early 1960s. This movement was the offshoot of the accumulated frustration of the Blacks as a result of their progressive alienation from their community with the failure of the Reconstruction. In their desperation they turned to arts which, according to Mary O'Oconnor, give the "feeling of solidarity [that] eases the pain offering some compensatory world of connectedness"(200).

Since drama is the most direct expression of the hopes and aspirations of the community, it became their most legitimate weapon against the white oppression. The African-American playwright had to exploit this medium in its different aspects: as form of mimesis; as an arena of community involvement; as a place for training artists; as a laboratory for testing out ideas; and finally, as an activity for self-fulfilling desires. Baraka was committed to drama and theatre for all these reasons.

Unlike Baraka whose interest in drama transcended immediate interests of community, Bullins employed this medium for addressing the problems within the community itself. While Baraka was relentless in his accusations of the black bourgeoisie for their complicity with the white masters, Bullins' theatre depicts the alienated black middle class as victims of the society at a specific time. His portrayal of the whites is mild as compared to that of Baraka's. Bullins did not portray the whites as absolutely antagonistic to the blacks; he was more interested in dealing with the internal problems within the community and advocated ways of solidarity among the Blacks. Leslie Sanders' remarks about his plays are significant:

> Love between men and women is the principal barometer of social health in Bullins' plays, and in none of them does the cultural nationalist measure well. (171)

The New Black theatre took a new turn by mid-seventies with the progress of the Women's Liberation Movement and the decline of the vigor of the Black Arts Movement. Baraka turned to the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology and his plays (and also poetry) at this stage became diffuse and lost the radical temper of his earlier nationalistic focus. But Bullins continued to work on his solidarity project and his work became a model for younger playwrights like Richard Wesley, Ben Caldwell and Ron Milner. One can conclude by saying that the impact of Bullins on the younger generation was greater and more profound than that of Baraka. The reason for this lies in the fact that Bullins was "inner-directed" and Baraka was "other-directed" and confrontationist. The strength of Black theatre lies in its self-introspection.

At this stage African-American theatre took an immensely significant turn in the hands of a feminist dramatist like Ntozake Shange. Novelists like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor and others have added substantially this feminist dimension to Black writing and expanded its scope and changed its orientation.

Ntozake Shange electrified the American theatre with the production of her choreodrama *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* on Broadway in 1976 surpassing the number of performances of Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun.* Although Shange deviated from her predecessors in her treatment of certain themes and in her treatment of black male characters, she carried further and refined the traditions started by the playwrights of the Black Arts Movement. She attacked everything that countered the revolutionary process, which was begun by the playwrights of the 1960s and the early 1970s. Besides aggressively attacking the dramatic conventions of the Western world, she also attacked the hegemony of the so-called Standard English by her innovative linguistic variations from the set rules of grammar.

Her greatest contribution is the new dramatic form—the choreopoem—that combined music, dance and songs. Her plays are sometimes in the form of a monologue or a series of monologues. These experiments are the indication of the direction that the present African-American drama may take in the future. The African-American drama of the future is likely to take the form of what could be called *performance pieces*—a combination of modern forms of music, dance, songs and storytelling. The immense popularity of *for colored girls* is an evidence of this future direction.

William Branch speculates on the new directions that contemporary African- American drama will be taking after "[h] aving achieved important milestones in several directions": (1) as a means of racial enlightenment and protest to the dominant European American society; (2) as an in-house communication among African Americans; (3) as an "equal opportunity" partner with mainstream American theater; (4) as a means of reinforcing ancestral ties with other Africans in the diaspora ("T" xxxiv)". On the basis of the demographers' charts, Branch foresees that in the new century,

> European Americans will lose their numerical dominance of the U. S. population... [and] Blacks, Latinos, native Americans, Asians and other 'peoples of color' will collectively come to dominate the U. S. work force; ... [when] Womanpower will undoubtedly come into its own; [and that it will be a] century with new challenges, new problems and new opportunities—for progress, for disaster, for something in between, perhaps. (xxxiv)

Branch asks African Americans to think over several alternatives that may be available to them in the future. First, African-American playwrights must contribute importantly to "the great task of revising, for a changing population, the educational, economic, political and cultural perspective of the society"; second, they must choose themes for their work from the

various forces of their history not in order to militate them against similar forces from the history of white Americans but to re-examine them in the context of their contribution to a multi-ethnic culture; third, there is a need for African Americans to "develop a greater global consciousness... given that over four-fifths of the world's citizens are people of color"(xxxiv).

To sum up, African-American drama will have to cater to the special needs of the Blacks but at the same time it will have to attract the audiences from other communities in order to shed its insularity and ghetto-like exclusivity. August Wilson seems to be the playwright of the future. His plays appeal apparently to mixed audiences and avoid contentious issues which might flare up racial confrontations. While Baraka had set the tradition of cultural nationalism through his Revolutionary Theatre, the other black playwrights of the subsequent decades carried it forward to the present time. August Wilson's plays deal with the themes that his predecessors had dealt with, but they are more affirmative and constructive in their vision than the plays of his predecessors. He understands the multi-racial and multi-cultural identity of America and therefore directs his plays for all the citizens of the nation. His plays depict the after-effects of the slavery and the socio-political and psychological problems that the African-American community has been facing. He echoes Bullins in this regard and at the same time tries to improve on the former. He seems to suggest that the African Americans could overcome their history and destiny by establishing a cultural wholeness, which encompasses the entire population in the United States.

Black vernacular replete with the blues forms the most common element in the plays of all these playwrights. The future African-American playwrights will necessarily have to emulate the contemporary playwrights in their use of the blues language. They will have to find better ways of combining music, dance, songs and storytelling in their plays in order to attract theatergoers. August Wilson who succeeded in exhorting his audience without taking

recourse to agit-prop and didacticism is best equipped to provide a role model to the playwrights to come.

The futuristic suggestions offered by Branch are made in the light of the changing context African-American drama, which indicates the days of the open confrontation with mainstream theatre seem to be over and that the Black drama of the future must be informed by a need for a symbiotic collaboration with its white counterpart so that a climate of reciprocity develops between the two groups. The change perceived in the Black drama now indicates that such a possibility is not a distant cry.

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