

# **Nationalism and Contemporary African-American Drama**

## **Abstract**

The emergence of African-American Nationalism as a socio-political and literary movement in the USA in the early 1960s is a highly significant event in the history of African-American people. Although it is not something new, it is, as Theodore Draper says “similar to and yet different from its manifestations in the past; it is related to and yet distinct from all other nationalisms in the world today.” African-American nationalism in the 1960s is different from its earlier manifestations insofar as it recuperates the earlier movements and adds to its ideology a greater aesthetic dimension; it is similar to the earlier movements in its political zeal and racial self-consciousness and its artistic power to transform the condition of blackness into an allegory of self-expression.

Looked at historically, the African-American nationalism of the 1960s, unlike its past expressions which had taken the color of political activism, assumed the form of cultural nationalism and was enhanced by the Black Arts Movement in general and Black Theatre Movement in particular. However, all the earlier movements have contributed significantly to the revisionary process of this nationalism, which is still going on in its many transformative modes.

This study aims at exploring various forms of African-American nationalism from a historical perspective and examining its expression in the contemporary African-American drama. Questions like, What is “Black nationalism”? What is its function? its relevance? its impact on American society in general and black life in particular? are vital in any discussion of contemporary African-American literature in general and drama in particular where such questions are raised with tremendous vigor. The basic assumption in my study is that African-

American nationalism is an expression of a sense of cultural solidarity among the Blacks who have been trying in various ways since their traumatic experience of slavery to find appropriate modes of cultural expression. Since political power is difficult to obtain in a white-dominated society, the only way they could legitimize their position was through their artistic and cultural identity. This identity, however, should not be defined as a separatist strategy of exclusion; it can be understood now as a specific response to a pluralistic society, which encourages varieties of modes of expression. One can say here that this need for a cultural nationalism was a natural reaction against the forces of dislocation, which threatened their existence since their arrival in America as slaves.

Allied to this basic assumption, my study deals with other questions too. For example, the emergence of African-American nationalism in the 1960s cannot be understood as a sporadic event; it is an integral part of a revolutionary tradition in African-American writing which was always already underway. Secondly, this nationalism was a reaction against the integrationist tendencies of the Black middle class. Thirdly, my study has tried to demonstrate that drama as a performative mode of literature has conveyed more eloquently than any other form the prevailing moods and ideologies of contemporary African Americans as they self-consciously search for a distinctive identity in the context of their American experience.

The playwrights selected in this study are Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, Ntozake Shange, and August Wilson. Although their modes and methods of articulation are different, they share the same ideology of cultural nationalism. In my dissertation I have taken into account the gaps in the attempts made by several scholars to study these playwrights individually and have tried to examine some representative plays in the light of the persistence of cultural nationalism as a unifying force in African-American consciousness today.

Since the early seventeenth century, blacks in America have developed a common code of communication—which is beyond the white man’s comprehension—which they have used for communication among themselves especially in an emergency or to convey a special message in the same way as they used drums to communicate during the plantation years. The black authors drew inspiration from their predecessors and repeated the themes dealt with by them either from a different perspective or in a form in tune with the time in which they lived and with a special purpose of educating the community. Out of this communicative system, efforts have been made recently to develop theories, which could apply to black texts.

Some Black theorists have been examining this cultural nationalism by placing the works of the Black writers in contemporary theoretical perspectives. With the rise of post structuralism, feminism, Lacanian psychoanalysis and other modes of analytical tools for interpretation a new way of looking at racially and ethnically conscious texts is already in order. Black theorists have been using some of the new insights and methodologies and trying to study Black texts in a fresh way. Various theories have come up by African-American scholars as expression of a need for revaluation of Black literature in terms of its inherent cultural and racial paradigms. These Black theorists feel that it is not proper to examine Black texts in light of Western theories developed by whites. Such attempts at developing distinctive Black theories were made in the past, but they did not consolidate into a systematic formulation; they were merely scattered attempts made individually by Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal and others without any move towards a collective consensus. Houston A. Baker, Jr., Willie Susan, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. have made the most significant efforts in this direction. Baker’s theory of the “Black vernacular,” Susan’s theory of the “specifying” and Gates’s theory of the “Signifying Monkey” are such attempts at defining African-American critical theory. The trickster figure from the black mythology—the Signifying Monkey, a

version of the divine Eshu in the African Yoruba language—is the role model for the African-American playwright to learn from the strategies of survival in a world dominated by whites. There are characters resembling the mythological trickster or there is at least one quality of that trickster in a character in almost every black text.

Through the insights provided by Gates's theory of "the Signifying Monkey" it is possible to understand the plays by African-American playwrights by decoding the language which has been used as a cultural code since the early days of slavery. Moreover, Gates's theory, which involves formal signifying of black texts, could be extremely helpful in the process of reclaiming the history of the Blacks in America.

Chapter I introduces the concept of Black Nationalism in general and African-American nationalism in particular. It also provides the historical context of African-American drama and theatre to the critical examination of the dramatic works of four contemporary African-American playwrights—Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, Ntozake Shange and August Wilson—in the subsequent chapters keeping African-American nationalism at the centre.

Chapter II deals with the plays of Amiri Baraka, especially those plays on which his reputation as a nationalist rests. Baraka's production of *Dutchman*, *The slave*, and *The Toilet*, (all produced in 1964), caused tremendous vibrations in the theatre world in the country and earned him a name as a new revolutionary playwright. Confronted with the task of liberating the black psyche fettered in the white value system of the dominant society, Baraka used the language of violence, obscenity and blasphemy as an important component of his "revolutionary theatre." Although in his later plays, *The Motion of History*, *S-1*, and *What Was the Relationship of the Lone Ranger to the Means of Production?* (1979), he expands the scope of his drama to cover the entire humanity—irrespective of colour or nationality—

oppressed by one common enemy, monopoly capitalism, he does not deviate completely from his early advocacy of cultural nationalism.

Chapter III deals with the examination of the dramatic works of Ed Bullins, another central figure of the Black Arts movement, particularly those plays that have prompted critics to pronounce him as a cultural nationalist. While Baraka advocated overt violence against whites to counter white racism, Bullins dealt with the issue of racial conflict very tactfully in his *Theatre of Black Reality*. The central focus in his plays is on the forces and problems within the black community itself that counter revolutionary change. His attack on whites is relatively mild and this marks a deviation from the treatment of whites by playwrights like Baraka. In *Goin' a Buffalo*, and *Clara's Ole Man*, for example, he lays bare the problems inside the black community that one has to tackle before the racial conflicts are addressed. His emphasis on the cultural identity as an inevitable step towards African-American solidarity puts him on the frontline of the tradition of African-American nationalists.

Chapter IV focuses the dramatic works of Ntozake Shange, a powerful woman writer whose choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1976) is a significant contribution to Black feminist theatre. Like her male counterparts, she understands the magnitude of the racial problem of the Blacks in the USA and the extent to which women are responsible to deal with the issue and to take a position with regard to Black Nationalism. Through the portrayal of black women in her plays, she points out the vulnerability of Black women to both black male exploitation and racial oppression. She expresses her concern at the double subjugation of the black women in the white male America but also points at the victimization of the black male. She underscores the necessity of African-American unity in general and that of black female sisterhood in particular as an important instrument to fight against forces that oppress the community. If one takes the

‘African-American urge for solidarity as a means for their racial survival’ as one of the meanings of Black Nationalism almost all of Shange’s works reveal “an affirmation of the human will to survive.”

In Chapter V the dramatic works of August Wilson, the most recent and a very powerful African-American playwright of cultural nationalism, are examined. His five plays, beginning with *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (1984) to his most recently produced *Two Trains Running* (1990) form parts of a proposed cycle of ten plays “to reclaim” all the ten decades of the present century. They chronicle five decades through the blues and black music and thereby try to give the correct version of African-American history that has so far been misrepresented by whites. Without taking recourse to “agit-prop” plays or overt didacticism, Wilson admonishes the African-American people for their even slightest aversion to their cultural roots. Wilson, like his predecessors, suggests that the cultural nationalism is relevant even today as racial discrimination exists in a subtle form in American society. Like other playwrights included in the study, he believes that political activism alone cannot solve the black-white problem. In his plays he deals with the effects of separation, migration, and reunion on the descendants of slaves who migrated from the rural South to the urban North. In examining the lives of these migrant blacks, Wilson’s focus is on their dreams, their restlessness, and their struggle to find practical and spiritual havens in an essentially hostile society. His examination of these aspects of the lives of his characters also raises interesting questions about the rural South and the black American’s place in it. He explores the decisions that led them away from the familiarity of their farms into a strange industrial milieu.

Chapter VI, which is the concluding section, sums the previous arguments and makes an attempt to suggest the future direction of Black theatre. This speculation is based on the many innovative strategies employed by the playwrights to make a sense of their existential

condition and to suggest possible ways by which they could forge a sense of cultural identity for their race. Their experiment with language and other techniques of representation signal a new direction. This direction is in keeping with the increasing awareness of the Blacks of their crucially significant role in a multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-ethnic American society.