

INTRODUCTION

*"Who is this man, why are we here,
will we survive?"*

—Norman Mailer

In this thesis I have divided the poet's life and art into three phases. These are chronologically known as 'The Beat Period' (1957-1962), 'The Black Nationalist Period' (1965-1974) and the third may be called 'The Third Word Marxist Period (1974—).

During his Beat period when he was known as LeRoi Jones, Baraka lived in new York's Greenwich Village and Lower East Side, where he published important little magazines such as "Yugen and Floating Bear" and was socialized with such bohemian figures as Allen Ginsberg, Frank O'Hara, and Ted Wileantz and Ginsberg, in particular, shaped his conception of a poem as being exploratory and open in form. Donald Allen records in "The New American Poetry" (1945-1960) Baraka's Beat period views on form: "there must not be any preconceived notion or design for what a poem ought to be. 'Who knows what a poem ought to sound like? Until it's thar' say Charies Olson... & I follow closely with that. I'm not interested in writing sonnets sestinas or anything.only poems". (Harris, Intro).

Baraka's political protest is the transitional period (1963-1965) when he wrote *'The Dead Lecturer.'*" his second book of poetry, which is a work

of a black man who wants to leave behind his white music and the white world. It is a book written in a period that marked a time of changing allegiances, from bohemian to black. As the civil right activities intensified, Baraka became more and more disappointed with his white friends. In 1965, following the assassination of the black Muslim leader Malcolm X, Baraka left Greenwich Village and the bohemian world and moved uptown to Harlem. Herein he began a new life as a cultural nationalist. He propagated in "The Legacy of Malcolm X, and the Coming of Black Nation," (collected in *Home*) that "Black people are a race, culture, a Nation." Turning his back on the white world, he established the Black Arts Repertory Theater School in Harlem, an influential model that inspired black theaters throughout the country. In 1967, he published his Black Nationalist collection of poetry *Black Magic*, which traces his painful exit from the white world and his entry into blackness. In "A Poem Some People Will Have To Understand", (published in the poetry collection *Black Magic* in 1969) he says, "We want poems that kill". He writes, "Assassin poems, poems that shoot/guns...../we want a black poem. And a Black world." The two fold idea of destroying and rebuilding runs through most of his 'hate poetry". Through "Art" as an instrument and a weapon, we "kill" the old and build a new Black Jerusalem. (Harris, Intro).

After a year in Harlem, he returned to his birthplace, Newark, New Jersey, where he continued his cultural nationalist activities. In 1967 he changed his name from LeRoy Jones to Immanuel ("spiritual leader") Later

he dropped Ameer (later Amiri, "Prince") Baraka ("blessed"), as a confirmation of his pride in his blackness.

In 1947, dramatically reversing himself, Baraka rejected Black Nationalism as racist and became a Third world Socialist. He declared in the New York Times: "It is a narrow nationalism that says the white man in the enemy ... Nationalism, so-called, when it says 'all non-blacks are our enemies', sickness or criminality. In fact, a form of fascism." (Harris; Baraka Reader). Since 1974 he has produced an number of Marxist poetry collections and plays, including *f-fard Facts Poetry of the Advanced*, and *What Was the Relationship of the Lone Ranger and the Means of Production?* He has also published a book of Marxist essays. *Daggers and Javelins*. The goal of his socialist art is the destruction of the capitalist state and the creation of a socialist community. Baraka has stated: "I think fundamentally my intentions are similar to those I had when I was a Nationalist. That might seem contradictory, but they were similar in the sense I see art as a weapon of revolution. It's just that I define revolution in Marxist terms. Once defined revolution in Nationalist terms. But I came to my Marxist view as a result of having struggled as a Nationalist and found certain dead ends theoretically and ideologically, as far as Nationalism was concerned and had to reach out a communist ideology." (Harris: *Baraka Reader*, Intro) His socialist art is addressed to the black community, which has, he believes, the greatest revolutionary potential in America.

In *Hard Facts* he says that in order to "raise the level of the people", the artist first must learn, not just from one ethnic group, but from the people, these "dynamic working masses". Poetry since 1974 reflects this new shift. The poem in *Hard Facts* are same as those of Langston Hughes's socialist poems collected in *Good Morning, Revolution* and "When we'll Worship Jesus" can be compared to Langston Hughes' "Goodbye, Christ".

*We'll worship Jesus when
He gets bad enough to at least scare
Somebody-cops not afraid
Of Jesus
Pushers not afraid
Of Jesus, capitalists raci&ts
Imperialists not afraid
Of Jesus shit they making money
Of Jesus. (HF6)*

In this thesis, I would like to point out that there are certain attitudes and insights in Baraka's poems evincing his originality as poet. He is like one of those mavericks, who, like Allan Ginsberg and Norman Mailer, has produced large volumes of work that are extremely critical about American civilization. In fact Baraka may be the most difficult American poet to evaluate dispassionately like the modernist poet Ezra Pound, whose works still evoke volatile critical response. Like Pound, Baraka has dared to bring radical politics into literature and to deliver his explosive ideas in an inflammatory style.

About his writing, let Baraka speak for himself, "My writing reflects my own growth and expansion, and at the same time the society in which I have existed throughout this longish confrontation. Whether it is politics, music, literature, or the origins of languages, there is a historical and time/place/condition reference that will always try to explain exactly why I was saying both how and for what". (Baraka Reader, *Preface*)

The present study is basically analytical in nature and hence collection and analyses of books both primary and secondary, have been the major source of findings. For the purpose of arriving at a particular conclusion, reliance is placed on documents, books, statements and resolution relating to the theme and imagery used in the poems of Amiri Baraka. In the process of analyses, some reflections of authors and critics of Amiri Baraka - Le Roi Jones are consulted with a view to supporting the contention. References are made to secondary sources, articles, papers published in leading journals, national and international, regional and local dailies and weeklies. Data is also collected on the Internet both primary and secondary.

Since no thesis is complete without a bibliography, I have prepared the same following the instructions as laid down in the MLA Handbook.