CHAPTER - 2

The Black Arts Movement of 1960s: A Study of Its Aesthetics

The Renaissance of Black Americans becomes matured in the 60s under the Black Arts Movement. It is the most remarkable movement of Black Americans, which is marked by social, political, racial, cultural and literary consciousness. Explaining the Black Arts Movement, Larry Neal, a pioneer of the movement says:

The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community.... As such it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America.... (It) proposes a radical reordering of Western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique and iconology. ¹

Quoting Black Nationalist Ron Karenga, famous critic Steele says that this movement “must expose the enemy, praise the people and support the revolution”.² Apart from consciousness at all labels, this movement suggests protest and anger of Black Americans. In a broader sense, John O' Neil says that truly this movement brings about “affirmation of the Black reality — affirmation of Black potential, not trying to take Black dreams and paint them white”.³ The three opinions mentioned above, in fact, give us a basic idea of the aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement. The first statement is about cultural reformation; the second is about social reformation and the third is the assimilation of both the statements. Thus it says that the society and its culture must be viewed from the
angle of the all-round revival of the Black Americans, which was earlier embedded with everything white.

Sterling Tucker holds the opinion that The Black Arts Movements is the spiritual sister of The Black Power Movement that emerged out of the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s. According to him:

The cry of Black Power had already sounded on the march and it announced the turning point.... It was not just a momentary fancy or the rhetoric of a fringe group. It grew out of all the frustration that had been building over the past years, catalysed now by the unforeseen circumstances of the march itself. The appeal it held to the rank and file of the movement was dramatised them. They expressed the new mood of defiance. ... The praying and the singing have ended. Black Power, Black control and Black Liberation must accept the challenge. 4

For all Blacks the psychological impact of Black Power was profound. It was a new awareness of self for too long, Black America had been white washed by the values and standard of the white majority, for too long, it had tried to be the imitation of the White. Black power, was in fact, based on the concepts of self-defense, self-definition, and self-determination, and sought autonomy, not integration. It aims at reclaiming the history and the identity of the Black Americans from the so-called "cultural terrorism", from the depredation of self-justifying white guilt. It aims at creating their own terms to define themselves and their relationship to the society and get those terms recognised. Thus, to face and accept one's Blackness became exhilarating during the movement. To
affirm Black is beautiful was itself beautiful. The sudden access to self-respect was a kind of rebirth. It united knots, straightened backs, and lifted faces. The Blacks identified themselves in a new way and initiated a brotherhood. Their likeness and their oneness became an asset and the unit became not just physical, but spiritual, cultural and artistic.

The word "arts" refers to subjects of study in which imaginative and creative skills are more important. But "Black Arts" is something extra and special and has something more than this lexical meaning. "Black Arts" is defined as "Black magic" by some of the pioneers of this movement. It is exclusively applied to the creative art that the Black writers produce. Larry Neal says:

Black Arts is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. The Black Arts and the Black Power concepts both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics, the other with the art of politics.

The Black artist feels that his primary duty is to speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of Black people. Therefore the main thrust of this new breed of contemporary writers is to "confront the contradictions arising out of the Black man's experience in the racist west." These writers are re-evaluating Western aesthetics, the traditional role of the writer, and the social function of art. Implicit in this re-evaluation is the need to develop a black aesthetic. So consciousness of both of art and society go together in a comprehensive and all-round manner. Critics often name it as "double-consciousness", which is
interpreted as the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others which must be overcome in order to arrive at true self-worth and an acknowledgement of African heritage.

As Larry Neal has already observed, the Black Arts Movement speaks directly the needs of Black Americans. It tries to establish a Black aesthetic so as to build up a strong future for them. It makes it imperative for the Black Artist to create new forms and new values, sing new songs; and along with other Black authorities, create a new history, new symbols, myths and legends. It expects that the Black artists in creating their own aesthetic must be accountable for it only to the Black People. Black aesthetic implies several things. First, it is assumed that there is the existence of a basis for such an aesthetic. Essentially, it consists of African-American tradition. But this aesthetic is boarder than that tradition. It encompasses most of the usable elements of the Third World culture. However, "the motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction white ideas and white ways of looking at the world." In fact, this movement was concerned with the articulation of experiences that found their essential character among the Black urban masses.

The aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement of 1960s derives its inspiration from the elemental African artistic forms and axioms, both as a revolution and an affirmation. The new aesthetics attempts to resurrect the native African forms as the Parameters of a distinct Afro-American experience. The Black aesthetic primarily aims at the rebuttal of a deliberate undervaluation of the Black experience and art by the white Americans. As a medium of asserting the cultural identity of Black Americans, the Black aesthetic becomes a means of
contradistinguishing the Primitive African art from the values and norms of Western aesthetic that determines the artistic ethos of the White Americans. The negligence of the art, culture and social position of the Black Americans can no more be tolerated. So realising this, Addison Gayle writes, “The problem of the de-Americanization of Black people lies at the heart of the Black Aesthetic.”8 The Black Aesthetic or the Black Arts then, as conceived by this writer, is corrective, a means of helping Black people come out of the polluted mainstream of Americanism and offering logical, reasoned arguments as to why he should not desire to join the ranks of Norman Mailer or William Styron. To be an American writer is to be an American, and for Black people, there should no longer be honour attached to either position. The poets like Amiri Baraka, Don L. Lee, Larry Neal and Sonia Sanchez etc. write poems that transcend their sentiments. They reflect the struggle to find imaginative freedom within a fixed and determined form of the movement. They accept poetry in terms of its concrete function and action, no more abstractions. Poems are physical entities: fists, daggers, airplane poems, and poems that shoot guns. Poems are transformed from physical objects into personal forces. Then poems affirm the integral relationship between Black Art and Black People. Their poems must stand for the collective conscious and unconscious Black America. It must reflect the real impulse of the Black Power Movement, which is characterised by self-determination and nationhood.

A spirit of cultural nationalism, supported by the distinct qualities of African art, in contrast to the values of the western aesthetic, shapes up the Black aesthetic. Black Arts, right from the days of the African past has an intrinsic appeal for revolutionary urges in its essentially "functional, collective
and committing" character. For the Black artist of the 60's, art is not only an expression of his experience but an integral part of his experience, the experience that does not present a reflection of any individualistic sensibility but the emotive bond of communal ethos. His art cherishes a sense of commitment to the aspirations and values of Black Americans. The western aesthetic, since the days of Aristotle, has been a reflection of an individualistic sensibility. It has never been a functional part of western experience nor has it ever been committed to any distinct purposes and aspirations of western life. It presents such a multiplicity of experiences and values that it could never present any distinctive perspective other than those the peculiar artistic experience led to. But the consciously formulated Black Arts of the 1960s presents a collective and communal art based on Black reality. It aims at making the Blues and Jazz help the Black Americans regain their Pre-American African spirit. This becomes necessary as both the forms of music, which arose out of the Negro's life in America, one echoing the Negro servitude and suffering, and the other rebelling against the same in asserting a care free merry attitude, got so westernised with their exposure to the patterns of western melody and harmony.

The Black Arts Movement of 60s questions the very ethics of human survival. It is a profound ethical sense that makes a Black artist question a society in which art is one thing and the actions of men another. However, it believes that ethics and aesthetics for Black people are one.

Earlier the Black Americans were quite underdeveloped and had an enslaved mentality. They were never conscious of independent social and cultural existence. They had accepted white dominance and oppression as the law of the
land. They were never giving priority to their own selves, own values and own thoughts. Their thought was rather shaped by their so-called white masters. The fact was that their enslaved and unconscious minds could never think of harmony or creativity like things. So the conscious efforts during the Black Arts Movement was to take the Black Americans to the stage of deep consciousness so that they could realise their potency as Black People and could throw away the servile mentality so that they would never submit their thoughts and actions anymore to their white masters. They would be spirited and self-confident. They wanted to usher a modest and pragmatic state of mind of the Black Americans.

The writers of the Black Arts Movement tried their best to influence their people to be politically involved because political involvement could only make them learn the reality. They could only go to the equal height of the whites only if they became politically conscious. This was the only way to make them dynamic. This could establish their logic and if possible could change the law of the land. They wanted to prove that such a racial discrimination was a political factor, a dark spot in the American system of life. Creating educational consciousness was the other aim of such writers. The real education could only be obtained where ignition of intuition took place. These playwrights were spiritually and morally confident enough to arouse their people's intuition in the form of a spiritual life force. Thus their attempt was to raise their people to the state of mediation and subsequent realisation. It was an effort to make each Black Man fully conscious and far sighted. This was, of course, the dream of a healthy mind. This would enable them to distinguish what was true and what was
false; they could distinguish what was moral and what was immoral; they could realise what was socially beautiful and justified.

Since the Black Writers were not thinking their writings to be a matter of pastime, they were quite serious. Instances of oppression were a loss of human values for them. They wanted to be no more humiliated. In order to propagate the motto of the movement they wrote in a documentary fashion that would clarify the issues and involve the Black Americans in the radical process of mind wash. It was an initiative for evolution of the Black soul, an attempt to bring about a reformation so that the Black people could realise in terms of Shelley’s pessimistic cry of “Oh I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed!” leading to a sense of optimism, “If winter comes, can spring be far behind ?”[10]. Hence this kind of propagandistic social documentation was very much utilitarian and noble in its effort. It made an honest attempt in creating a sense of optimism in a quite pessimistic world of existence.

Since the purpose of literature is to teach and delight, the writers of the Black Arts Movement strictly adhered to these principles and rejected the theory of “Art for Art’s Sake” and created Art for teaching the Black people how to bring a change in their social position. As mostly conscious and educated artists, they tried to teach a sense of dignity through a kind of search for identity. They wanted to create a kind of ‘willing suspension of disbelief ’ by making their people identify themselves with the characters they have created. As to the delight part of their literature, these writers provided entertainment to their Black audience by touching their hearts through selection of subject matters of
their oppressed life. Thus the entertainment they provided was truly purgatorial in nature.

Till the Black Arts Movement, there was no codification of their language. They used to speak a disapproved language. But this Movement was to approve and identify their own language, may it sound vulgar and be full of slang. This was the product of their prolonged cultural and instinctive ways of life. So they tried to give a separate identification to their language. This kind of struggle to bring about a special identification one's language was, in fact, a self-conceited effort. It was meant to give the Blacks a distinguished position in the American Society. Further, being lovers of music, they wanted to give a radical, reformative and purposeful shape to the Black music. Thus the musical consciousness of their people was to strengthen their culture and enlighten their spirit because music happened to be the food for their oppressed and passionate hearts. It was their friend, philosopher and guide.

Thus the conceited effort of the Black writers of the movement was to set up a ladder for the evolution of Black life in America in a systematic and dignified manner. They wanted to establish separate social, historical, political and cultural system through their literature so that the common Black Mass could realise the different stages of their development and guess about their position in future. Their overall effort was to affirm the Black cultural nationalism, which was a step forward to awaken the Black people for a distinct Black identity or to recognise the beauty of Blackhood. The Black artists of this movement followed the following guidelines to enlighten their people through their writings:
1. Raise the level of consciousness through liberating the spirits and strengthening the minds of its people.

2. Be political, i.e., must deal in a positive manner with the existing conditions of oppression.

3. In some ways, educate, i.e., educate the Black people to bring out that which is already within, give them knowledge and truth.

4. Clarify issues, i.e. enlighten the participants as to why so many negative conditions and images exist in their community in order to eliminate the negative condition and to strengthen the positive condition.

5. It must entertain.

6. Its goal is to produce the language of Harlem spectators, with new information about themselves, so that they leave uplifted, reaffirmed and enlightened.

7. Music is a big part of the lives of them.

8. The five cycles of evolution are the base of the technique of the actors of them. They are-the Nigger, the Negro, the militant, the nationalist and the revolutionary.

The term "Black Arts" is of ancient origin. It has its root in the Harlem Renaissance. But it is expressed more effectively by Amiri Baraka who writes:

We are unfair and unfair
We are Black magicians
Black arts we make
In the labs of the heart
The fair are fair and death white
The day will not save them
And we own the night.
The Black Arts movement is rooted in a spiritual ethic. In saying that the function of art is to liberate man, the Black Artists propose a function for art, which is related to their most ancient traditions. At base they say that art is religious and ritualistic; and the ritual moves to liberate man and to connect him to the greater forces. Thus man becomes stronger psychically and is thus more able to create a world that is an extension of his spirituality as well as his positive humanity.

The Black Arts Movement preaches liberation that is inextricably bound up with politics and culture. The culture gives the Black Artists a revolutionary moral vision and system of values and a methodology around which they can shape the political movement. They would like to reflect them in their own literature in which we find the values, the life styles, and the feelings of the people as expressed in everyday life. Even we find in them something more symbolic and powerful as regard to their revolutionary ideology.

The Black man's art in America is like his music, which cannot be separated from his life. His art has evolved from his life style and his will to survive. All that he perceives and makes with a medium will have his stamp on it. And for this reason, it may be argued that the art of the 20th century Black artist is one which shows different kinds of experiences that reflect a realistic portrayal of certain aspects of American Life.

A more comprehensive study of the Black Arts Movement reveals that the dynamics of social protest and propaganda play a vital role in Afro-American Art of the 60s. It is in this context that the Black art becomes a distinct category of American Art, which takes into account the state of Blacks in America. It helps to
create a unifying characteristic in art that is based on the experiences of life instead of the systematic explanation of stylistic form. The Black Arts Movement explains every aspect of an artist's background like his race, nationality, religion, family and education. These aspects play an important part in the shaping of his personality and expectations in life—what he is and what he has experienced in life. This will help to shape the form of his art as much as it will determine his life style. While contemporary American art has become progressively more concerned with form to the exclusion of emotional or objective content, works created by Black artists have generally emphasized content and are labeled by the critics as "social realism".

Even the question for the Black critic today is not how beautiful is a melody, a play, a poem or a novel, but how much more beautiful has the poem, melody, play or novel made the life of a single Black man. How far has the work gone in transforming an African Negro into a Black-American? Thus Black aesthetic or Black Arts helps the Black people to come out of the polluted mainstream of Americanism, and offers logical, reasoned and artistic arguments for their better existence.

Ron Karenga, a pioneer of the Black Arts Movement of 1960s says, "the works under the movement must be like Le Roi Jones' poems that kill and shoot guns and 'wrassle' cops into alleys taking their weapons, leaving them dead with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland." Black arts must be collective and it must be from the heart of Black people in a form more beautiful and colourful than it is in real life. For that is what art is—every day life gives more form and colour. And in relationship to that, the Black artist can find himself productive.
For no one is any more than the context to which he owes his existence and an artist owes his art to that context and therefore must be held accountable to the people of that context too obviously. The Black writers under this movement seek to use art as a means of educating the people, and being educated by them, so that it will be a mutual exchange rather than a one way communication. Art and people must develop at the same time and for the same reason. It must move with the masses and be moved by the masses. Amiri Baraka goes a step ahead in this context. He says that Black people can’t steal anything from the whites. The whites have already stolen it. They owe to the Black people nothing they want; even their lives. So he says, “So, Black people! take the shit you want, take their lives if need, but get what you want, what you need. Dance up and down the street, turn all the music up.” This Black art will revive them, inspire them, and give them enough courage to face another disappointing day. It must not teach them resignation.

In essence, Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts Movement have had a profound and lasting philosophical and aesthetic impact on all post integrationist Black art; Observing the principles of the Movement, Baraka, in his essay 'Home', declares fiercely:

The Black Artists’ role in America is to aid in the destruction of America as he knows it. His role is to report and reflect so precisely the nature of the society, and of himself in that society, that other men will be moved by the exactness of his rendering and if they are Black men, grow strong through this moving, having seen their own strength, and weakness, and if they are white men,
tremble and go mad, because they will be drenched with the filth of their evil.

Baraka, Ed Bullins, Ron Karenga, Ron Milner, Adrienne Kennedy, and Larry Neal etc, dominated the Black Arts period of the late 1960's both as theorists and artists. They were the main artist-intellectuals responsible for shifting of the emphasis of contemporary Black literature from an integrationist art conveying a raceless and classless vision to a literature rooted in the Black experience. The Black Arts Era, both in terms of creative and theoretical writing, is the most important in Black literature since the Harlem Renaissance. No Black Arts artist thinks of himself or herself as simply a human being who happens to be Black, but 'Blackness' becomes central to his or her experience and art. Black Arts Movement had its impact not only on the Blacks but also on other ethnic groups. In this connection remarks on Baraka by Maurice Kenny is quite relevant. He says, "He opened tightly guarded doors for not only Blacks but also for poor whites as well and of course, native Americans, Latinos and Asian-Americans. We had all still be waiting the invitation from the New Yorker without him." Baraka poured fuel on the motion of Black Arts Movement of 1960s being influenced directly by the Black Liberation Movement and most particularly by Malcom X and also patriots like Robert Williams.

As a part of the movement, the Black Arts Repertory Theatre School opened in Harlem Brownstone, a month after Malcom X's assassination. This Theatre often had heated discussions on the role of the Black artists in the Black revolution. The Black Arts Movement formulated here was significant because it
sought to articulate and structure a Black art that must come to exist, side by side with and as a form of Black Liberation Movement itself.

The writers under BARTS wanted an art that was Black - that reflected the history and current lives, the life styles and aesthetics of Afro-American nation. They wanted an art that was mass aimed, that could leave the libraries, academics and coffee shops, and speak directly to the people. Such an art was oral, one meant to be listened to one that could be performed on the backs of trucks, in playgrounds and projects, right out on the sidewalks. It was a mass out, and anti-elitist art, and definitely they wanted an art that was a revolutionary struggle for self determination. They wanted to spurn the bourgeois critics or "dizzy white boys" in their plays. Thus the main tenet of the Black Arts Movement was a reflection and expression of Black people's struggle that sought to destroy white racist America and build something beautiful in its place. A famous critic Bigsby also says of the Black Arts Movement of 60s in a more convincing way. He says that it was an attempt to destroy the white dominated society by "double consciousness of the Black Americans." 16

In his article, "Black Arts", Baraka says that "art ... is an expression of life... that art, as such, expresses the values of the artist. And as such, it is a manifestation of the artist's value system.... Art expresses the values of its creator-the values being whatever you think is good and what you think is bad, what you think is beautiful and what you think is ugly." 17 In this sense:

Black Art... meant not only an art that was an expression of Black life, but revolutionary arts. The theater... was revolutionary theater, a theater... created by Black people; Black by culture in
that it was an expression of African culture; but also Black in terms of its consciousness. 18

Black Art, according to Baraka, is anti-racist, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist. It is the expression of themselves as conscious Black people but not slaves. This art would be a weapon against cultural aggression. By a cultural aggression he means the normal educational system in America which teaches them to be white racist from childhood. But the Blacks are determined not to be biased any more. According to Baraka, Black Art is based on a value system such as *Nguzo Saba*, the Seven principles: unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, co-operative economics, purpose, creativity and faith. Black Art would be based on the unity of Black people rather than system of division Black people.

The Black Arts Movement of 1960s is clear-cut leftist and revolutionary. We may consider these two terms ‘leftist’ and ‘revolutionary’ seriously and use them befittingly as the two major dimensions of the aesthetics of this Movement. The Random House Dictionary designates “the advocates of liberal reform or revolutionary change in the social, political, or economic order”19 as the left. Evidently enough, the writers of this movement advocated in favour of either revolutionary change or liberal reforms in their society. Amiri Baraka, the pioneer of the movement was in favour of revolutionary change in the American society, which he presented in these plays. He was never ready to accept any established convention of the Whites. So he displayed violent means of protest, murder, anger and anti-white subject matters in his plays. But Ed Bullins followed the other kind of leftist ideology. He wanted to bring some liberal reforms in the American Society. So in his plays, he only displayed some of the selected
and effective dramatic events, which were very much associated with the
drawback, follies and unjust position of Black Americans. Both of them were, in
fact, inspired Marxists.

These writers tried to make their people active and involved in such a
movement. They did not want their people to act as passive readers or passive
spectators. They rather ignited them to realise the reality and their potentiality.
So their writings were no doubt, innovative, spirited, and adventurous. As leftist
orthodoxy required “conversion endings” for plays, some Black writers of the
movement like Baraka made the principal characters of their plays move from a
state of negation to a state of positive commitment at the end. These converted
characters try to bring a change in the society by converting the Black audience
into active participants in the class struggle against the whites. As these writers
were very much committed to their art, they selected certain really oppressed and
neglected events of Black life showing physical and mental suffering of the Black
people that is inflicted upon them by the whites as the subject matter of their
plays. Their main aim was to change the slavish mentality of the Black people.

The plays written during the Black Arts movements are mainly divided
into three categories : (i) the plays of Black consciousness and (ii) the plays of
Black Experience and (iii) The plays of Black destiny. The plays of Amiri Baraka come
under the first category because he presents his Black characters as mostly
conscious and revolutionary. On the other hand the plays of Ed Bullins are
considered to be the plays of Black Experience as all his characters are Black
people who lead a typical kind of Black life. In most of his writings, Bullins
effectively shows the typical activities of the Black people. He presents his
characters in a way that he experiences. He wants to bring about Black upliftment in a reasonable way. Larry Neal stands as a visionary and therefore he can dream of the ultimate destiny of the Black Americans.

Finally Black Arts Movement includes the revival of the Blues. The former is concerned with resistance, with rejection of suffering and the projection of art as a model for life; where as the latter implies resignation, the transmutation of suffering into an acceptable form. So the Blues is no doubt an integral part of the literary product of this movement. More appropriately it plays an important role during the Black Arts Movement Larry Neal writes:

The blues, with all of their contradictions, represent for better or for worse, the essential vector of the Afro-American sensibility and identity. Berthing themselves sometimes between the end of formal slavery and the form of the century, the blues represents the ex-slave's conformation with a more secular evaluation of the world. They are shaped in the context of social and political oppression, but they do not, collectively teach resignation.

They are about survival of Black American in the meanest level of human existence. They are lyric responses to the facts of Black American life. The essential motive behind the best blues song is the acquisition of insight and wisdom. The ethos of the blues, is the musical manifestation of their cultural experiences. For Black Americans the blues is:

an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but
by squeezing from it a near tragic, near comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically."

Like Blues, the Blacks performed the Minstrel show where they masked and mimed a ritual that alluded to the things of their African past. They reflected their communal beliefs in this way. Like the Blues, it was essentially choral and improvisational with the call and response motifs. It had the patterns of ritual, mask, mime, song and dance, presenting a communal lifestyle, anguish and recreation befitting distinct Afro-American dramatic and theatrical genre.

To conclude, we must say that the Black Arts Movement of the 60s emerges with some unique and inherent values of the Black Americans at all level. It influences the Black people to be aware of their social, political, cultural and artistic strength so that they can define and re-evaluate their world in their own terms. Thus the pioneers of this movement advocate cultural revolution in art and ideas that would enable the Black Americans to see the world in a meaningful way and find out their own identity in the white dominated American society. The three playwrights under examinations like most other Black American writers did not concern themselves in any major way with doctrinaire or ideological matters. However, they all stood for social justice and a change in the system and considered the use of art for this purpose as perfectly legitimate.

Notes


Larry Neal, 29

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P.B. Shelley "Ode to the West Wind", The Muses Bower: An Anthology of Verse, ed. The Dept of English, Lucknow University (Hyderabad: Orient Longman limited, 1977) 54

Amiri Baraka's "We are unfair ...", Quoted by Larry Neal "The Black Arts Movement", Twentieth Century Dramatic Review, Vol. 1 (Summer, 1968) 31


14 Baraka, 213


18. Baraka, 23


21. Neal and Schwartz, 49