Chapter Four

Black Cultural Revolution and the New Black Aesthetics

The immediate impact of the nationalist black Muslim movements on the cultural field of the black society was the development of a cultural nationalism that revolutionized all spheres of black cultural life - language, literature, arts, theatrical world, dance, music, cinema and the rest of the concerns of their cultural existence. Till the emergence of this phenomenon, the black cultural field was short of an identity; it only reflected the white outlook and followed the white aesthetics. It was the growth of the black nationalist movements that created a revolutionary change in the black cultural field. In their brief introduction to Julius Lester's essay "Cultural Nationalism," William M. Chace and Peter Collier observe:

The models for personal beauty in America have been white and white only, as have been all other cultural standards. Black people have had no choice but to measure themselves, to some extent at least, by those white standards. ...this situation has done great violence to the black man's conception of himself. He could not, for all his attempts, ever be white; yet his own culture had been almost completely destroyed during slavery and had been left in limbo ever since. Whatever native American culture he did
create out of the ambiguous circumstances of his life here was quickly appropriated by the dominant society without recognition of its genesis... Under the influence of Malcolm X, however, and with the coming of black power, blacks began both to rediscover and recreate an identity as Afro-Americans with significant accomplishments and a unique cultural tradition born of their oppression in America. In a process that is far from complete, they began to assert the integrity of the black experience and demand that its true meaning, so long ignored, be written into the nation's history books. (518-519)

Roland Snellings / Askia Muhammad Toure, Ron Karenga and Le Roi Jones / Amiri Baraka were the three key figures, besides others, that vehemently brought in this new trend. In fact, it was Toure and Karenga who first set the trend and Jones soon entered the field and dominated it.

Askia Muhammad Toure

A black Muslim veteran in the socio-cultural field of Afro-American society in the post-war period, Askia Muhammad Toure, who named himself after the Songhay emperor Askia, the great, was a revolutionary activist, poet, historian and graphic artist. Inspired by the great black leaders of the Islamic tradition, Toure enthusiastically worked for the rising of the legendary black nation. He was one of those great visionaries in the black cultural field who struggled strenuously to invigorate the black race to overcome the western white society. He was for some time an associate editor of the prestigious Black Dialogue
magazine and the editor at large for the Journal of Black Poetry. His essays on social and cultural issues were of great influence in the black American society. His role in the development of the new black aesthetics and in changing the direction and orientation of black writings since the 1960s has been inestimably great. As both theoretician and practitioner of black aesthetics, of all other black writers, he was closest to the Islam experience and was a great model for the younger poets and writers to emerge. Toure very vehemently believed that the moral, ethical, cultural and literary reconstruction of the black people in America was possible only by cleansing them of the white American cultural influences and going back to the Islamic culture and ideology. And therefore, the black aesthetic was of a crucially important role to play in the revival of the black society. Addison Gayle, Jr. observes in his tract "Reclaiming the Southern Experience: the Black Aesthetic 10 Years Later":

Toure is an experimental poet, searching continually for new forms of expression, and he could be analyzed and reanalyzed to the point of meaninglessness by critiques that focus upon his technical dexterity with poetry, yet ignore the important social and political meaning of his work. (Such critics—those who mount the barricade against social art and criticism, like white critics, believe that there is something unique and distinctive about Black poets who are expert in the technical aspects of the genre.) Black poets, however, with Toure, have long been aware of the fact that the form is little more than this instrument through which the poet addresses his community—the conduit carrying the
prophecy which alone can produce change in thought and perception. (561-562)

Ron Karenga and the Kawaida Movement

Ron Karenga, a prominent black nationalist leader whose ideas about politics and culture influenced Amiri Baraka and other young black writers of the time, was head of an organization known as US. As he had accepted the title of Maulana, which meant "master teacher," he was widely known as the US Maulana Karenga. Karenga's mission in the period of the black nationalist uprising was to produce "a cultural revolution to win the minds of our people" after which, "the political revolution would be a matter of course." Inspired by the black Muslim movement of the time, Karenga envisioned, as Bob Bernotas noted, to "ignite a black American cultural revolution." As one of the prominent intellectuals and theoreticians of the Black Arts Movement, Karenga viewed "culture," as the poet Larry Neal has pointed out "as the most important element in the struggle for self-determination."

It was with this purpose of bringing about a black cultural revolution conducive to the political revolution envisioned by the black nationalist leaders, that Karenga created a set of behaviours and rituals—an entire culture—designed to politicize black people by instilling them with "blackness." What Malcolm X tried to do in the political and religious fields of black American life by harnessing the chaos therein, Karenga did with immense success in the cultural field. Larry Neal cites Karenga in his tract "The Black Arts Movement":

Culture is the basis of all ideas, images and actions. To move
is to move culturally, i.e. by a set of values given to you by your culture.

Without a culture Negroes are only a set of reactions to white people.

The seven criteria for culture are:

1. Mythology
2. History
3. Social Organization
4. Political Organization
5. Economic Organization
6. Creative Motif
7. Ethos.

(192-193)

With reference to these seven criteria for culture, Karenga had given shape to a programmatic value system known as Kawaida. The theories of cultural nationalism and the programmatic value system Karenga designed were of great appeal to many contemporary black writers, especially Amiri Baraka. Bob Bernotas notes:

... Jones was impressed by the discipline of US, especially when he compared it with the political chaos that had crippled BARTS. "The fact of the US organization i.e., that it was an organization and not just a bunch of undisciplined people taking up time mostly arguing with each other about what to do, or what method to use, even about things that most agreed should be done _ drew me to US and Karenga," he said. (82)

Commenting on the peculiarities of "Kawaida," Theodore R.
Hudson observes in his *From Le Roi Jones to Amiri Baraka*:

Kawaida is really more a practical ethical system than it is a theoretical and structured religion. Or to say the same thing in other words, "it is a calculated religion that has as a major goal the ordering of its adherents' lives to the extent that they are predictable in their behaviour, and this desired behaviour is one that Imamu Amiri Baraka feels will unify black people's minds and actions for their mutual well-being. Actually, Kawaida is the doctrine of Maulana Karenga and it is the spine and total of the US organization. (103-104)

In his noted essay "7 Principles of US Maulana Karenga & the Need for a Black Value System," Baraka explains the principles of the US organization as follows:

UMOJA (Unity) _ To strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation and race.

KUJICHAGULIA (Self-determination) _ To define ourselves, name ourselves, and speak for ourselves, in stead of being defined, and spoken for by others.

UJIMA (Collective work and Responsibility) _ To build and maintain our community together and to make our brothers and sisters problems our problems and to solve them together.

UJAMAA (Co-operative Economics) _ To build and maintain our own stores, shops and other businesses and to profit together from them.

NIA (Purpose ) _ To make as our collective vocation the
building and developing of our community in order to restore our people to their traditional greatness.

KUUMBA (Creativity) _To do always as much as we can, in the way we can in order to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than when we inherited it.

IMANI (Faith) _To believe with all our heart in our parents, our teachers, our leaders, our people and the righteousness and victory of our struggle. (Raise... 133-134)

Baraka held that the seven principles were solutions to the political dilemma of the black people. In his view it was capable of transforming black people and by doing so it will transform America altogether. In his Kawaida Studies: The New Nationalism, a collection of six essays published in 1972, Baraka deals with the doctrine of the Kawaida movement and its practical implications. Karenga's announcement, "Black art must expose the enemy, praise the people and support the revolution," was in perfect harmony with Baraka's aesthetic outlook. It gave a strong sense of direction to the poets and writers of the black community of the time and was of immense impact on the black literary works of the time.

The phenomenon of the Kawaida movement thus originated in the black American society of the post-war decades and radically transformed their cultural life. was an off-shoot of the black nationalism that dominated the political and religious realms of the Afro-American people of the time. The heroes of this movement, as with the other champions of black cultural nationalism, had been Malcolm X, Elijah Muhammad, Du Bois, Garvey and the rest of the luminaries in the black
history that inspired them with a sense of pride and self-respect.

**Amiri Baraka and the Black Cultural Revolution**

Although relatively late to enter the scene, it was Le Roi Jones who gave intellectual leadership to the movement by supplying the ideological and philosophical support it needed. Le Roi Jones who at a stage in his career became a follower of Malcolm X, joined the Muslim community and accepted the name Amiri Baraka, was, by general consensus, recognized as the father of this movement. William J. Harris observes in his introduction to *Le Roi Jones / Amiri Baraka Reader*:

As both theorist and practitioner he was the central figure, "the acknowledged father" as the poet Haki R. Madhubuti (Don L. Lee) called him, of the 1960s' Black Arts Movement, a literary movement dedicated to racially focussed art. Acting as an energetic artist-critic-spokesman, Baraka almost single-handedly changed both the nature and the form of post-world war II Afro-American literature. (Xvii)

Born in Newark, New Jersey in 1934, in a family of ex-slaves, and educated at the local schools and the Howard University and served for a period in the United States Air Force, Le Roi Jones underwent startling transformations at various stages of his life. He began his career as a writer in the late 1950s with the zealous association with the white avant garde writers, eagerly struggling to adopt innovative elements in both form and content. From the early years of his career till the mid-sixties, Baraka was largely in the white line of thinking, in socio-political
matters as well as cultural and literary issues. He was least aware of the predicament of the black people in America and the role of the black artists and writers in the reconstruction of their society. His sole preoccupation seemed to be to excel in his career as a writer and reach out the standards of the leading white American writers. William J. Harris remarks:

For the Baraka of the mid-sixties, to be an artist was to be white, to be cut off from ethnicity. To write was to be universal which, for him as for other minority artists, also meant to be white. (The Poetry... 88)

As an avant garde writer, Baraka had obtained a good deal of recognition and was accepted as a significant Negro poet of his time. But his transformation from this condition was startling and sudden. In a 1965 essay, quoted in Harris's study, the avant garde critic Kenneth Rexroth commented on this transformation of Jones:

For a number of years Le Roi Jones was the most significant Negro poet to come up since Jean Toomer. His first two books contain poetry which is moving, penetrating and independent of race, except as a given factor of the poet's situation. In recent years he has succumbed to the temptation to become a professional Race Man of the most irresponsible sort... (The Poetry... 89)

In fact, as William J. Harris has noted, Baraka, in the mid-sixties, was greatly disturbed at what he perceived to be the failure of the post modernists to provide a poetics flexible enough to include black language and culture. The black artist, in spite of his creative potentials, was in the
margins and could not get into the mainstream except with inevitable loss of his cultural and ethnic identity. He further realized that black culture in America was a sub-culture and the ruling white culture was dominant on the lives of the black people. He vehemently tried to escape the influence of this dominant white culture on him. And thus in the sixties, he deliberately began to seek his path outside the white mainstream and to strip off the white influence especially in his career as a writer.

This new awareness soon found its effect in his writings as he deliberately began to discard the white elements from his literary creations. William J. Harris remarks:

Beginning with the poems in *Sabotage* (written between 1961 and 1963, immediately following the poems of *Dead Lecturer*) Baraka started stripping away his ornate style, a style he identified with whiteness. (*The Poetry...* 88)

This transformation in his outlook and aesthetic approach was occasioned by two significant events in his life. The first was his trip to Cuba in 1960 and the second was the unfortunate murder of Malcolm X in 1965. Commenting on the former event Harris further remarks:

Baraka's 1960 trip to Cuba provided him with an alternative both to the avant garde and to liberal politics. This trip was one of the transforming experiences of his life. Clearly, the Cuban revolution provided him with an alternative he could not find in America; when he returned from Cuba he had shifted from being a Beatnik with *a little political curiosity* enough certainly, to make him take the trip *to being a nascent third-world revolutionary*... Baraka's trip to Cuba did
not provide the model for his new political poetry; however, it did provide the new consciousness that led him to become a third-world artist. (*The Poetry...* 76-77)

The visit to Cuba had given him an accurate awareness of the artist's commitment to the society and his role in its reconstruction. But it was the second event that gave him a direction in the Black American context and brought about the completion of his transformation.

The death of Malcolm X in 1965 was for Baraka a sign of the absolute evil of the white society. Moved by this event Baraka left his village, abandoned his white wife Hettie Cohen, his personal white world, and moved uptown to Harlem, where he publicly became a cultural nationalist, committed to black people as "a race, a culture, a nation."

Though the particular persuasions of Askia Muhammad Toure, A. B. Spellman, Max Stanford and some few others may have added impetus to Jones' transformation, the death of Malcolm X was clearly the pre-eminent influence upon him.

In Harlem, with other young black intellectuals such as Larry Neal, Haki R. Madhubuti / Don L. Lee and Ron Karenga, Baraka worked enthusiastically in the cultural field, as a writer and an artist, yielding good result. There, as a result of his efforts, developed a new enthusiastic movement in the black cultural field described often as black cultural nationalism, the Second Black Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement etc. It was Baraka who, as head of this movement, defined and interpreted the meaning of cultural nationalism and championed a new black aesthetics.

The Harlem-centred cultural revolution led by Baraka manifested
itself in almost all aspects of black cultural life. In literature was the Black Arts Movement, in the theatrical world was the Black Arts Repertory Theatre / School (BAFTS), in music there was jazz, the music of the Afro-American people, and in aesthetics there was the black / jazz aesthetic. It thoroughly revolutionized the literary and cultural fields of the Afro-American society. It radically transformed the style, themes, and general orientation of the black literature and gave birth to an altogether new literature with a new thrust, character, perception and worldview.

The prime factor that gave Baraka the impetus required for this transformation was obviously the new awareness he got from the nationalist movement led by Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X and the spirit they created widely in the black society of the period. Talking about the transformation of Baraka in his foreword to an interview with Baraka, Askia Muhammad Toure has said:

I had not conversed or spent any time with Le Roi Jones since early 1966, so I was totally unprepared for the changes that he has undergone and the tremendous growth he has experienced. Recently Brother Marvin X showed me excerpts from two interviews he had with Brother Le Roi. Much to my surprise, I found myself agreeing almost totally with what was being said, and further, I found that no longer was Brother Le Roi the alienated "ex-villager," concerned not only with lambasting whitey, but with reconstructing the political, cultural and spiritual identity of the emerging Black Nation. (141)

Toure has further observed that the statements and comments
made by Brother Le Roi in this wake represented a step eastward in African-American culture that was prophesied by the epic journeys of El Hajj Malik El Shabazz / Malcolm X to mother Africa, the holy city Mecca and the Middle East.

Although Baraka later underwent changes of disputable nature, this transformation in favour of black nationalism and Islam was deliberate and complete. Talking to Marvin X and Faruk, two black Muslim journalists, in an interview entitled "Islam and Black Art" held late in the sixties, Baraka confides:

...I guess Islam first influenced me through Brother Malcolm, Hajj Malik, because he was the first Black man that associated Islam with progressive social thinking. At that time that is as much impact as it made on me: the idea that Islam was being connected with progressive social thought and with Black nationalist thinking. I guess I was first influenced about '64 ... when I first began reading and thinking about it ... It wasn't until I got back to Newark that I began to get serious about Islam in terms of a spiritual philosophy, rather than just a connective issue with political activism. I began studying the root and history of Islam and associated philosophies and trying to get to the spiritual key to the Black man. I did a lot of reading and thinking about it. I came under the influence of Hesham Jaber of the Sunni Muslims. He's done a lot to clarify my thinking about Islam and about the deep meanings hidden in the Muslim faith. And Elijah Muhammad taught me how the moral teachings
of Islam benefit the Black man; he taught me how the philosophy of Islam offers the black man a chance to regenerate himself... It's the higher, more esoteric, hidden meanings of religion that interest me most; where religion and science are actually the same. And if the religion is meaningful, it's supposed to be a way of explaining all phenomena in the world rather than leading you away from it. You can always tell when a religion is degenerate, because it begins to cover more than it reveals. And I think Islam, even on its popular level, is certainly a way to lead to truth rather than cover it. It seems that at this point Christianity has become a vehicle for the degenerate... it tends to cover truth rather than reveal it. (144-146)

Baraka's transformation from an avant garde writer to a black revolutionary artist attained its completion when he joined the Muslims in 1968 following his arrest and trial over charges of gun possession. After his acquittal, he accepted the new name Imamu Amiri Baraka with its obvious connotations. Of the three elements of his new name the title Imamu was given to him by the black cultural leader Karenga. Kimberly W. Benston, author of Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask, observes:

There are three essential aspects of this metamorphosis, each of which is indicated by one of the three new names. First, there is the self-determining creation of identity, an accomplishment of the Vatic Imamu, or Muhammadan poet/priest. Second there is a transcending of the slave past symbolized by the "slave name" Jones, the revolt of an
Amiri or warrior/leader. And last is the religious conversion from western Christian to non-western Muslim, the gift of the Baraka, blessing. These are, at least, the visible features of Baraka's name change. They are the main elements of Baraka's biography relevant to a study of his art... (xviii-xix)

As pointed out by Benston, Baraka's conversion to Islam was of a very wide impact. It helped him discard his old Christian and slave identity. It effected a radical change in all aspects of his individuality. His conviction, outlook, moral and ethical life, aesthetic, literary and socio-political inclinations and all other aspects were correspondingly transformed. In his private life, he shifted his loyalties from Christianity and Church to Islam and the black nationalist movement. His wife Sylvia Robinson changed her name to Bibi Amina Baraka and became a Muslim as well. His children were given Muslim names. He learned Arabic, the language of the Holy Qur'an and read extensively about the ideology of Islam, and ever since remained in the Muslim society with a pride in the new identity. In fact, Baraka was one of the few black intellectuals who made original and effective attempts to understand the ideology of Islam. His later transformations, often interpreted to be in a direction opposite to Islam, were, in a sense, movements towards the genuine spirit of Islam.

The most obvious and spectacular effect of Baraka's conversion to Islam was the impact it had on his career as artist and writer. It provided him with a new identity, and a meaningful direction; it endowed him with a purpose and mission as an artist. It was this new direction that enabled him to develop a new literary and artistic outlook and to formulate a new
aesthetic altogether. It was this new aesthetic that made him immensely significant and that won him a host of followers. He, quite soon, had admirers and ardent followers in all fields: literature, art, theatre, music, folk arts, film, literary criticism and even politics. Among the many important black artists influenced deeply by Baraka included playwright Ed Bullins, film maker Spike Lee, and poets like Larry Neal, Don L. Lee, Haki R. Madhubuti, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni and many other young and ambitious poets like Lorenzo Thomas.

Baraka's influence on the black writers and artists of the 1960s and 1970s was profound and pervasive. As both theoretician and practitioner, he was the central figure of the literary and cultural renaissance of the period. In literature, especially black poetry, it was a thorough transformation that Baraka achieved. He was, as William J. Harris noted, "acting as the Ezra Pound, the energetic artist shaper of the contemporary black poem" (The Poetry... 121). As the most influential and gifted writer in the black cultural surge of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Baraka made his contemporary black intelligentsia acutely aware of their special predicament and got them involved in a cultural revolution the goal of which was the reclamation of authentic black culture and the development of a new aesthetic. This process, however, as Askia Muhammad Toure observes in his short essay "The Crisis in Black Culture," was not an easy one:

So we must see that many risks will be involved in organizing Black people on even cultural levels; but we have no choice if we expect to continue to exist as a national cultural entity. Only in this way the creation of a National
Black intelligensia: the development of a Black cultural philosophy / ideology; the creation of a working unity of all black artists; the development of National Black Cultural Institutions and Bodies _ can we overcome the current crisis in Black Culture and move to fulfill our National and Racial Destiny. "MOVIN ON UP!" (39)

What Toure has convincingly expressed here was successfully put into practice by Baraka. He could unite the black artists / intelligentsia on a broader plain and persuade them to work unitedly for the uplift of their nation and for the reclamation of their racial, social, political and cultural identity. No wonder Baraka's influence on the black people lasted a long period and it still remains. It was not confined to the 60s and 70s. He continues to influence, inspire, guide and direct the black geniuses even today as William J. Harris rightly notes in his introduction to Le Roi Jones / Amiri Baraka Reader:

His influence extends into the 1990s; it is evident not only in the expected continuation of black nationalist themes in the work of such figures as Jayne Cortez and Ntozake Shange, but also in the works of mainstream personages like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, and that of younger figures like the filmmaker Spike Lee, the poet Thulani Davis, and the critic Greg Tate. In essence, Baraka and the Black Arts Movement have had a profound and lasting philosophical and aesthetic impact on all postintegrationist black arts; they have turned black art from other-directed to ethnically centered. (xvii)
This trend, in short, brought about such an outburst of literary and artistic creativity that by the mid-1960s more black writers and artists were working very vehemently than ever before, and that too on a nation-wide scale, unlike the increased literary activity of the Harlem Renaissance of 1920s. Thus with the new generation of black writers and artists who were proudly and aggressively disdainful of traditional or mainstream aesthetics and literary and artistic standards, the era of Uncle Tom pro-integration attitude in art and literature ended and a new race-proud, revolutionary and separatist outlook began to reign over the black cultural field throughout America.

**The Black Arts Movement and the New Black Aesthetics**

The new awakening evinced in the literature and arts of the Afro-American community in the wake of the black nationalist movements of the 1960s and 1970s was identified as the Black Arts Movement for the first time by the influential black poet and critic of the time, Larry Neal. In his famous essay "The Black Arts Movement," he analyses at length the characteristics of the movement and explains some of the significant issues pertaining to it.

The term "Black Arts," as Larry Neal explained, was of ancient origin, but it was first used in a positive sense in the new context by Le Roi Jones:

We are unfair
And unfair
We are black magicians
Black arts we make
in black labs of the heart
The fair are fair
and deathly white

The day will not save them
And we own the night. (199)

As the term suggests, the Black Arts Movement was a movement in literature and arts exclusively of the black people in America. It was clearly an attempt on the part of the black writers and artists to come to their own, a search for identity in arts and literature and an attempt to redefine their own positions in the new context. Larry Neal states:

The Black Arts and the Black Power concept 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. (190)

The flowering of a cultural nationalism that sprang from Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. Du Bois in the 1920s and Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X in the 1960s, the Black Arts Movement implicitly suggested the idea that black people, however dispersed, constitute a nation within the belly of white America. The Black Arts Movement is in a sense the powerful literary and artistic expression of the religious and political movement of black nationalism. Just as the black nationalist movement was based on a defined ideology and set doctrines, the Black Arts Movement too had a doctrinal base, a new outlook and a clearly defined aesthetic of its own.
Inspired by the ideology of the black nationalist movement, the artists and writers of the Black Arts Movement viewed things comprehensively, and accordingly, art and literature only as part of the larger concerns of life. The career of the black poet or artist was viewed as his duty to his society, as Etheridge Knight, an important black poet of the time has said in his poem "For Black Poets Who Think of Suicide":

For Black poets belong to Black people.  
Are the flutes of Black Lovers _ Are  
The organs of Black Sorrows _ Are  
The trumpets of Black Warriors.  
Let all Black Poets die as trumpets.  
And be buried in the dust of marching feet. (131)

It was realizing the fact that the ethnic renewal of the black society depended greatly on autonomous artistic fulfillment that the young black intellectuals of the period made a rejuvenated attempt to establish a black aesthetic that would account for matters of politics as well as of art. Kimberly W. Benson points out:

The aesthetic discussions of the Black Arts Movement, led principally by Imamu Baraka, are an echo of those of Harlem Renaissance and Negritude eras; but in tones more assertive and magniloquent than previously imaginable. These discussions unified social and artistic ideology into one coherent black aesthetic theory. (54)

The primary impulse of the new movement, above everything else, was to strengthen the morale of the black society. Transcending the need for hierarchy of icons, heroes or myths, it sought to integrate all
cultural, political and spiritual qualities that have dignified and strengthened the Afro-American throughout his history. "The Black Arts Movement," as Larry Neal points out, "is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community" (187). It was, on the other hand, a movement that stood for the artists' commitment to the society identifying that his primary duty was, in Larry Neal's words, "to speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of Black people" (187).

The new poets, therefore, do not speak for themselves, but for a cause and for a collectivity — a black collectivity. As Nikki Giovanni says, the discipline of the revolution does not permit one to write "a beautiful green tree poem" or a "big blue sky poem." Amiri Baraka is even more explicit: "Let there be no love poems written / until love can exist freely and / clearly."

The Black Arts Movement was on the one hand a reaction to the white literary tradition and culture and on the other hand an attempt to establish a new creative doctrine and value system. "To accept the white aesthetic." Etheridge Knight points out, "is to accept and validate a society that will not allow him to live." The black writers and artists of the movement were engaged in a thorough re-evaluation of the western white aesthetics. the traditional role of the writer and the social function of art. Fed up with the inhuman white aesthetics, they eagerly strove to develop a new black aesthetic. Kwame Nkrumah's words quoted in the beginning of Black Arts: An Anthology of Black Creations edited by Ahmed Alhamisi and Harun Koli Wangara sound very pertinent:

A revolutionary ideology is not merely negative. It is not a
mere conceptual refutation of a dying social order, but a positive creative theory, the guiding light of the emerging social order. (13)

The Black Arts Movement was both negative and positive; a refutation of the dying white social order and the creation of a new social order. It was a journey away from the moorings of the white aesthetics and towards the development of a new black aesthetic derived from the new black nationalist ideology. The aesthetic moorings of the white society as a whole, naturally, were thoroughly re-evaluated in the new light and many of them were found unconducive to their newly accepted ideology and were discarded. New moorings conducive to the new faith were formulated to replace them. Black writers and artists who so far followed the white mainstream outlook and aesthetics were persuaded to turn away from it and seek the new path. Baraka, the greatest champion of the new movement, is a good instance of this transformation.

The new movement vehemently viewed the writer and artist as a champion and mouthpiece of the society he represents. Baraka remarks: "the poet's function is as an interpreter of society and as a reflector of society" (The Poetry... 148). The champions of the new movement were not prepared to approve of the middle class poets and artists who sought enjoyment in their individualism and privately cultivated sensibilities without vehemently responding to the need of their community. In 1963, in an essay entitled "Brief Reflections on Two Hot Shots" Baraka gave out his bitter and impassioned condemnation of James Baldwin and the South African writer Peter Abraham. It was an explicit rejection of their individualism and privately cultivated sensibilities. These along with
some observations made by poets like Nikki Giovanni and others referred to earlier were, in fact, a few of the first well-articulated statements of the aesthetic principles of the new movement that resulted in a socially committed art.

Even the protest literature, which implied the concept of appealing to white morality adhering to the white aesthetic, was eschewed. As Larry Neal argues, the black arts depended for its growth on the rejection of the white aesthetics and the ending of the protest and appeal, for they were seeking a new path which depended only on their cultural roots, and religious and political faiths. So far as the black people were concerned, the denial of the reality had been institutionalized in America and the duty of the socially committed artist was to bring out the truth. Baraka's words quoted in William J. Harris's study signify this:

... And any honest man, especially an artist, must suffer for it. The artist ... is a man who would say not only that the king has no clothes, but proceed from there to note how badly the sovereign is hung. (The Poetry... 127-128)

In Baraka's opinion, an artist cannot remain isolated from the society to which he belongs. His struggle has to be for the creation of an art that will speak for and represent his people, and its assessment will be in terms of its usefulness to the society. Explaining the stand of Baraka, Benston speaks: "...the poet is an Adamic creator, giving everything he hears and sees and feels its rightful name. His office is to make everything a beautiful and useful part of the black nation: ..." (39). And counselling the young black writers of his period Askia Muhammad Toure states in his short essay "The Crisis in Black Culture": "What New
Black writers must remember is that if we represent a New Black World-
view, then this must be reflected in our creative literature..." (32).

Thus the art and literature envisioned by the leading figures of the
movement were socially committed art and socially committed literature,
and here in their context, it has to be committed to the society of the
black people. It was to play a vital role in the reconstruction of the
society. It cannot remain aloof, untouched by the issues and events in the
social, political, economic and religious spheres of their society.

Unlike the mainstream white literary world, the Black Arts
Movement, quite significantly, did not approve of the doctrine of "art for
art's sake." In fact the works of the major black artists of the period were
pronouncedly against this doctrine. Black Fire, an anthology of Afro-
American writings edited in 1968 by Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, was
acclaimed as a powerful "put down of the 'art for art's sake' mystique that
had tried to mute and distort black writing after the forties." Although the
black writers had distinctly differentiated between art and the tracts,
speeches and other tools of political and religious activism, art, in their
perception, was to have a mission and a purpose and must be in the
service of the society at large. Following Baraka, they accepted
didacticism as an important element in the writings, and literature was put
to effective use as a powerful tool in the cultural and social revolution.

The western white society, according to the black artists, evinced
a contradiction between the ethics and the aesthetics. They found that in
the white society art was one thing and the actions of men another. There
was no integration of the two. The Black Arts Movement, on the other
hand, as Larry Neal stated, "be ieves that your aesthetics and your ethics
are one" (190). He further notes that the contradiction between ethics and aesthetics in western society is symptomatic of a dying culture. But in the black literature and art of the time, there was a fruitful and effective integration of the two. This was largely because their art was socially committed and their aesthetic was conducive to their ethical and ideological moorings. The artists and writers in the new awakening viewed their profession as a means of helping the reconstruction of their society. Benston notes:

Every work produced by the Black Arts Movement is thus a microcosmic cell of the black nation it envisions, each poem a shadow of tomorrow's reality. (42)

They believed that the black arts and the black nation they envisioned sustained each other. This is clear from the following lines of Baraka's poem "Black Art" quoted in Benston's study:

We want a black poem. And a
Black world.
Let the world be a Black Poem
And Let All Black People Speak This Poem
Silently

or LOUD (42)

The integration of their ethics with their aesthetics was not a strained effort for the artists like Baraka for they had identified smoothly their art with the black nation they envisioned and conversely the black nation with their art. It was absolutely harmonious. No wonder the black literature of the period significantly reflects the key aspects of their life.
The new set of themes, symbols, myths and heroes that recurrently appear in the black writings during this period must definitely have come from their life and genuine experiences. This was because of the closeness of their art to their life. For them, art was supposed to draw them closer to the society and its problems and not ever to alienate them from the society. It was, in short, an art of social commitment, and the career of the artists was their obligation to the society.

Another significant feature of the literature of this movement was the close link it had with the Afro-American music. In the whole history of the Afro-American society, their music, which was later identified as jazz, was a major internal force. It evoked in them memories of their African past, a period when they could with absolute freedom and dignity beat drums and follow their peculiar rhythms. It was there always with them; in everything they did the rhythm of their music was present. It was their music that determined, to a larger extent, the character of their language, literature, art, social life and even their religion. "The aesthetic experimentation of the Black Arts Movement," Kimberly W. Benston observes, "takes its theoretical lead from new analyses of black music" (37). It was, in fact, the Afro-American music that gave them the impetus for the inventiveness in the use of language and developing their own style in writing. Benston further observes:

Afro-American writers have always been affected by their musical counterparts. Black music, from blues and Louis Armstrong to bebop and Charlie Parker, has always been the most vital of black mediums, and poets such as James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes have been directly
inspired by musical forms. What the Black Arts Movement's theorists and poets added to the traditional respect for black music was an awareness of the revolutionary spirit inherent in this music's evolution. Black music could now be seen as an attitude as well as a style, its revolutionary character considered the result of a distinctly non-Western and, specifically, black mode of expression. Freshly inspired by the sounds of Coltrane, Rollins, Ayler, and others, the new writers seek a lexicon as vivifying and authentically black as the musical vocabulary... Like certain of their literary ancestors (particularly Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Jean Toomer), they push their language in what Don L. Lee calls "the direction of actual music." (37-38)

The choice of the language for the black writers of the period too was of great significance. Because words were not, in the Afro-American context, to mean or convey, they were on the other hand, to conjure up real things with magical effect. While the Euro-American tradition which Le Roi Jones and others abandoned had increasingly lost faith in its language, the Black Arts Movement elevated it to a magical status. For the black writer, the words of their language, born in the street and consecrated in the musical affirmation of the poets, do not signify a concept abstracted from private experience, but magically conjure up real things, real feelings—it becomes an incantatory formula.

In the foreword to Baraka: The Renegade and The Mask, Larry Neal remarks: "Afro-American music has been a major internal force in the shaping of Afro-American culture and literary style" (xi). The black
aesthetics was largely determined by the characteristics of the black music which was conditioned by the remarkable experiences of the black people. For Baraka, the black music represented the model for the assertion of a unified black ethos and in some ways even the means for attaining the desired Afro-American cultural independence. As with many others in the Afro-American literary tradition, Baraka finds in black music the essence of black experience, and therefore, the "black aesthetic" which they significantly called the "jazz aesthetic" was pre-eminently conditioned by the black music.

Thus the black aesthetics that offered the theoretical and doctrinal framework for the literary and artistic activities of the movement was the outcome of their new historical awareness and their new ideological dispositions which definitely had been evolved by the black nationalist movements.

The Black Arts Repertoire Theatre School

It was in the theatrical writings and performances that the outlooks and ideological peculiarities of the Black Arts Movement got most expressively reflected. Theatre being, as Larry Neal puts it, "potentially, the most social of all the arts" (193), it was being widely put to didactic purposes by the black artists of this movement. There was a noticeably clear shift in the orientation of the theatrical writings of the black people in the 1960s and 1970s in the wake of the black nationalist movement. An altogether new theatre with a new cultural identity, new mission, direction and motivation came into existence during this period. As with poetry, music and other genres of art, in theatre too it was the
influential efforts of Amiri Baraka that brought about a revolutionary change. The theory of art and aesthetics championed by Baraka and other playwrights of the movement being one of deep social commitment and largely characterized by their political, religious and moral orientation, the theatre they belonged to also became a powerful vehicle for their ideas. In their reaction to the decadent white American culture, the theatre was used as an effective tool to propagate their ideas and as a good weapon to fight with against injustice and foul play. In a seminal article of this movement "The Revolutionary Theatre" (1964), Baraka distinctly discusses his ideas of the new theatre. It formulates a theory of drama which determined the style, and content of dramatic writings in the subsequent years. In fact, Baraka's theatre, "the revolutionary theatre," was one of deep commitment to the society; "a theatre of social change, a theatre of victims, a militant theatre, a theatre devoted to the Black arts." It was, in Baraka's opinion, a "weapon" against what is "unnatural" and "mad." Talking about his revolutionary theatre, Baraka says:

And what we show must cause the blood to rush, so that prerevolutionary temperaments will be bathed in this blood, and it will cause their deepest souls to move, and they will find themselves tensed and clenched, even ready to die, at what the soul has been taught. We will scream and cry, murder, run through the streets in agony, if it means some soul will be moved, moved to actual life understanding of what the world is, and what it ought to be. We are preaching virtue and feeling, and a natural sense of the self in the world. All
men live in the world, and the world ought to be a place for them to live. (Home... 213)

It was as the fulfillment of the new theatrical and literary views that in the spring of 1964, Baraka, Charles William Patterson, Clarence Reed, Jonny Moore and a number of other black artists opened the sensational "Black Arts Repertoire Theatre School." It became immediately popular with the production of a number of plays including Baraka's Experimental Death Unit No. One, Black Mass, Jello and Dutchman. Writing about the circumstance in which the new theatre was started Bob Bernotas observes:

In an old brownstone on 130th street, Jones and his comrades founded the Black Arts Repertoire Theatre School (BARTS). They hoped to create an art that would stir blacks, raising their consciousness so that they might raise themselves. (71-72)

It was as a powerful tool for social change that they viewed the theatre. In the decadence of the white culture in America, it assumed greater significance. An integral part of the socializing process, the theatre existed, as Larry Neal has explained, in direct relationship to the audience it claims to serve. Outlining the iconology of the new theatrical movement, Baraka writes:

The revolutionary theatre should force change: it should be change. (All their faces turned into the lights and you work on them black nigger magic, and cleanse them at having seen the ugliness. And if the beautiful see themselves they will love themselves.) We are preaching virtue again, but by
that to mean NOW, toward what seems the most constructive use of the world. (Home... 210)

Baraka's revolutionary theatre took a direction opposite to that of the theatre of white America. The theatre of white America was escapist in nature and refused to confront concrete reality whereas the black theatre championed by Baraka and his friends, committed to the cause of the society, was "a radical alternative to the sterility of the American theatre." The American white theatre did not show any obligation to the society, whereas the black theatre was a direct address to the black people, and intended to help them change.

The role of Baraka in the formulation and growth of the "Black Arts Repertoire Theatre / School," "the first well-known performing organization with a nationalist outlook," as Benston describes it, was very significant, and in the late sixties, his leadership became intensified and was of crucial importance. As the best known and the most advanced playwright of the movement, Jones attracted many others to the movement and influenced them deeply. Among the excellent playwrights who thus expressed the general mood of the black arts ideology were Ron Milner, Ed Bullins, Charles Fuller, Aisha Hughes, Carol Freeman and Jimmy Garrett.

The impact of Baraka's revolutionary leadership in the "Black Arts Repertoire Theatre / School" was not confined to the Harlem-centred theatrical activities. It inspired many gifted black playwrights and theatremen to start many such result-oriented enterprises in the theatrical field in different parts of the country. The "Black House" in San Francisco's Fillmore district, and the "Black Arts Movement" that came
into existence there under the leadership of Ed Bullins who had worked together with Baraka many times, were a few of them.

"The Black Arts Repertoire Theatre / School" in Harlem, however, came under immediate attack by the New York power structure. And when the establishment, fearing the black creativity, forced it to be closed later, the implications of what Baraka and his colleagues were trying to do only took on even more significance. Black arts groups sprang up on the West Coast and the idea spread to Detroit, Philadelphia, Jersey City, New Orleans and Washington D.C. besides its forceful emergence in the campuses in San Francisco. The New Lefayette Theatre in Harlem that opened in October 1967 with the staging of Ronald Milner's play Who's Got his Own was in a sense a reincarnation of the BARTS, because the contributions of Ronald Milner, Ed Bullins and others were aimed at the cultural revival in the direction of Amiri Baraka and others of the "Black Arts Repertoire Theatre / School."

**Jazz: The Black Music**

Jazz, the modern Afro-American music that became globally popular, was another big achievement the Afro-American society made in the post-World War years. Rooted in the ancient African music and the natural rhythm of the black American life, the new black music, renowned as Jazz, came into existence in the wake of the new spirit of nationalism and with the new sense of independence. In fact, music was in no way new to the Afro-American society. Askia Muhammad Toure remarks in his essay "The Crisis in Black Culture":

Black people are world renowned and have been since the
Fisk Jubilee Singers of the nineteenth century _ for Black music which in this day seems to capture the dynamism, alienation, flux and change that is the "modern era." (31)

But it began to assume greater significance in the revival of the black American society in the post-World War decades. Central to the cultural renaissance of the time it became very popular and was, ever since, a dominant influence on the cultural life of the Afro-American society. Toure further notes:

Black music, especially Modern Afro-American Music (Jazz) is the main music that has been played in most countries worldwide and serves as the root or core of African-American culture. (31)

Much of the revolutionary effect of the black literature of the period was due to the powerful influence of the black music on the black writers of the time. The Afro-American music, being the symbol of their Africanness, sense of independence, and the most genuine of all artistic achievements of the black society, was together with other black art forms, revolutionizing the whole cultural scene of the black American society of the time. It clearly influenced their literature, theatre, and even aesthetics. "Jazzification, the practical application of the jazz aesthetic," as William J. Harris describes it, was a dominant trend in the black cultural field. Jazz, the black music, was in perfect harmony with the ideology of the revolutionary nationalist movement. It was the ingenious efforts of Baraka, Karenga and others that made the jazzification process easier and natural. Kimberly W. Benston notes:

... music has become both a damning judgment of the
nonblack consciousness and the medium of a redemptive apocalypse in which the physical and spiritual aspects of black being are fused. The musician has taken on an evangelical and revolutionary role, and his message (the music's explosive vibrations) and the black audience join in giving birth to the black nation. Music is all that black life was, is and ever shall be. (72)

This will be clearer from the lines of Henry Dumas' poem "Listen to the Sound of My Horn" quoted in Benston's study:

Listen to the sound of my horn, my people.
This rhythm of years long past.
Listen to the sound of my horn, I say;
Music and I ... have come at last! (72-73)

Dumas' story indicates that the Black Arts Movement's conception of black music makes possible a music-oriented black aesthetic consonant with black nationalist cultural ideology. The black genius who made this possible in the sixties was undoubtedly Baraka. Benston further notes:

On the one hand, Maulana Karenga speaks of the "rhythmic reality of a permanent revolution;" on the other, James Stewart asserts that "music comes closest to being" and blazes the revolutionary path away from the west toward "definite black values." Clearly what music teaches and what revolutionary ideology preaches are fundamentally alike. In the late 1960s, this equation received widespread recognition among black theorists. But it was Imamu Baraka who first
(and best) formulated the relation between a black music aesthetic and a black revolutionary ethic. (72-73)

The black music of the period has been a unifying factor so far as all the black arts were concerned. Its impact has been revolutionary and "explosive." Talking about the effects of the unification of black arts in the context of the new black music, Milford Graves remarks in his essay "Black Music: New Black Revolutionary Art":

What is artistic Dynamite? The unification of Black Musicians and Black poets. This unity will clearly motivate and direct black people towards total liberation. We are now seeing black painters combine colors with soul-black rhythm that causes the body to vibrate because of the objective truth these paintings contain. The new black theatre is using more revolutionary black human voice effects (Check the New Lafayette Theatre Co. under the direction of Bob Macbeth) as well as strong black body movement by the actors and actresses. Recently Brother Don Pullen and myself composed music for Brother Le Roi Jones' "Home on the Range." It was powerful. New black theatre with new black music. Dynamite! (40)

Although music had been, all along, of crucial significance in the life of the Afro-American society, Afro-American musical criticism until recently had been largely left to perceptive white men. It was the new national and cultural awareness that brought Baraka, Spellman and others to the scene. Larry Neal remarks in his foreword to Benston's study:

It took a long time for black writers to develop a critical
perspective on Afro-American music. After the pioneering efforts of Alain Locke, Sterling Brown, and John Work there was a hiatus in which very little critical work was done on Afro-American music by blacks themselves. So until Ellison's seminal essays in Shadow and Act, Baraka's Blues People and A. B. Spellman's Four Lives in the Bebop Business, Afro-American musical criticism was generally left to perceptive white men like Marshall Stearns, Andre Hodeir, Nat Hentoff, Henry Pleasants, and Ron Russell. But the movement toward cultural awareness forced black writers to assume more responsibility for a critique of the music and its social implications. It forced them to listen to the music of the people in a new fashion. Ellison led the way with his essay in Antioch Review on the blues idiom in Richard Wright; and in a more polemical tone, Baraka's essay "Black Music, White Critic" confronted the question of the white dominance in Afro-American musical criticism. Ultimately, writers as diverse as James Baldwin and Albert Murray became united in the idea that the music and the dance that accompanied it were the ultimate expressions of the African presence in America. (xv)

As soon as the talented black writers entered the scene of music criticism, it found quick and pervasive effect. It began to radically influence the other black creative fields. Literature, theatre and aesthetics of the time evinced the powerful impact of the black music. Jazzification was, since then, the general trend in all fields. It, in turn, became an
Effective way of communicating the genuine Afro-American response to the enveloping white world. In his famous works in black musical criticism, *Blues People* (1963) and *Black Music* (1967), Baraka demonstrates this fact. Music, in Baraka's view, is essentially the expression of an attitude, or a collection of attitudes, about the world. The attitude or approach to reality that lies at the root of black music, in Baraka's opinion, imbues this art form with a specific social and cultural intent. To understand black music's basic attitude and to explain the historical character of that attitude were two essential motives of Baraka's music criticism which indicates that he admired this music more for the viable philosophy in it than for its originality or durability. And this philosophy was rooted in "the spiritually pure time and place of Africa" — an idea that the black people were made extremely conscious of by the nationalist movement.