
Art as Resistance: Black Aestheticism in Amiri Baraka' and Maya Angelou's Selected Poetry

Hamza Rauf Awan

Department of English, Forman Christian College University, Lahore, Pakistan

Email address

hamzaraufawan@gmail.com, 20-34005@formanite.fccollege.edu.pk

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Abstract: The broad range of postcolonial literature deals with the issues of racism, anti-colonial rhetoric and rights acceptance, and it presents itself as resistance to common beliefs of universal euro-centrism. The present dissertation endeavors to highlight the socio-cultural and literary aspects of art which provides the external settings of the age it is being produced in and also unveils the overt ideology imbedded in literature. Moreover, it relies on two central questions: how African-Americans art becomes a voice of collective black consciousness and in what manners artistic compositions alter the conceptions and pre-perceptions of the natives under colonization. It contends that Angelou' and Baraka's poetry and its aesthetics not only pinpoint the black cultural stereotypes but also become a channel to disseminate the shared problems and consciousness of the color people. This research propounds to explore the black experience embedded in art and explores how art has always been a vessel for demonstration of collective experience of a community. By addressing the intricacies of black aesthetics in Afro-American art, this research props up new dimensions to study black experience and especially the concept of Eurocentrism in new folds in the contemporary age; this research paper, all in all, explores and analysis black experience along with black aesthetics in art.

Keywords: Color People, Black Consciousness, Black Art and Resistance

1. Introduction

Aesthetics, be it literary or socio-cultural, refers to the beautification of any phenomenon in accordance with certain norms, styles, and specifically, ethics. There is no denial of the fact that literary aesthetics catalyzes and provides an epitome of socio-cultural and historic settings; its roots can be traced in its history. The seed of literary standards sown by Greek philosophers nurtured with historic evaluation of external factors and trends in society. In other words, it is to say that classic literary ideas disseminated by Plato and Aristotle not only depict the candid picture of their respective age but also put forward their respective social understandings along with imbedded stressors to affect the receptors' minds. For instance, the classics focus on the nature of art whereas romantics rely on its functions. With the same grain, the literary tendency towards aesthetics and its expression evolves with time.

Likewise, the modern man and its taste for literary aesthetics have altered and prostituted remarkably. Artistically, after WWs and treacherous mechanizations of

colonization, the modern man has to deal with repercussions of stringent trinity of capitalism, colonization and imperialism. Consequentially, art has becomes a channel or medium to act as resistance to such overt powers. 'Storytellers are a threat. They threaten all champions of control; they frighten usurpers of the right-to-freedom of the human spirit' [1]. Keeping in view the aforementioned argument, so art can be an impediment and it may give rise to literary movements with resistant agenda. Thus, it is pertinent to mention here that Black Arts Movement is also a product of art evolution, wherein art like poetry, novels, and other artistic productions unanimously provided support for Black rights. Surprisingly, the selected poet, Amiri Baraka, was the main activist of BAM and his literary oeuvre succinctly depicts this in particular. Additionally, it is not wrong to argue that art has become anti-colonial or anti-imperial discourse for Africans; a channel embodied with lingual, socio-cultural and psychological expression in the form of language or audio-visual expressions [10].

In addition to the role of art and its outburst in the form of BAM as resistance medium, Harlem Renaissance and Civil

Rights Movement (1950-1970s) mutated the African art with new aesthetics. Former was a response to dominant discourse or rhetoric of 'whiteness' or 'euro-centrism, a belief that white is the only racial part of society to civilize 'the others' [20]. It made a significant alteration in depiction and expression of the color peoples; Africans endeavored to reinvigorate their cultural stereotypes, in other words, they preferred on 'recapitulation of their skin colors in their art without any shame' (Hughes). In this way, the revival of African culture, resistance, anti-imperial slogans and humanitarian civility was carried out, by revealing multifold facets of the color people. Latter is the political response against white-supremacy, strengthening the belief of black-pride and banning of transportation and legalization of the Black slaves. Thus, Afro-American and African literature or art became a channel for resistance against the colonizers. Moreover, aesthetics deals with cataclysmic events or social settings in which it is being produced as the poetry and artistic writings of Amiri Baraka and Maya Angelou depict accordingly. Accumulatively, the black consciousness took birth which acts as resistance to the colonizer-white supremacy.

This research paper will deal with the exploration and analysis of writings of Amiri Baraka (1934-2014) and Maya Angelou given with backdrop of art as resistance. Former, Poet Laureate of New Jersey (2002-2003), is the playwright, poet, and novelist; his writings encapsulate the anti-racism themes. Most specifically, his poetry artistically questions the race dominance and resonates the black-pride. Most importantly, Baraka is the central pillar of the BAM and Civil Right Movement. World signifies him as opulent speaker for the Blacks and his literary compositions propagate the black liberalism and acts as a nuke to white extremism. Significantly, he is known as the revolutionary poet owing to his anti-racist perception of west culture and such presentation in his poetry. Latter is Marguerite Annie Johnson, commonly known as Maya Angelou, is the most prominent critic of racism, a poet and scholar for black people. Besides this, she is an essayist, a playwright, a director and most importantly, civil rights activist like Baraka. Her poetry enunciates the 'liberating discourse' [9]. Surprisingly, her poetic oeuvre employs first person narrative to specify the oppressed black voice and establishes that she contends that 'Black Americans in Troubled Times' [15]. In addition, her poetry elucidates the themes of racial discrimination, subjugation, forced slavery and white orthodoxy. Moreover, she also candidly provides the traumatic effects of colonization and imperialism in her poetry; her poetic sensibility functions for the 'fallen blacks', black women and their subjugation, post-traumatic shocks in general and particularly, reveals the ways intended ideology is being indoctrinated to subjugate the color people.

Thus having provided tentative introduction of the selected poets, this research paper will question the colonial discourse and endeavor to unearth the overt ideologies responsible for the subjugation of the blacks. It will explore how gaudy colonial representation of culture is centered on racial

discrimination; it will investigate the sources or medium which are utilized for anti-racist expression. Most significantly, this dissertation will deal with how colonization (colonial aesthetics) rests on racism for its dominance? Second, how do cultural expressions and aesthetics get repressed due to dominant discourse? Third, in what manner does African art and its aesthetic values resist the cultural subjugation and racial discrimination?

This research paper will deal with the number of readings, critiques and literary critics to foreground the concept of resistance in the form of art production. Specifically, it will employ Foucault's theory of discourse: it is language affects the ways of expression; it is an institutionalized assimilation of intended knowledge, ideologies and desired socio-cultural and psychological imperatives encoded in language to objectify or operate the colonized or oppressed ones [10]. Apart from this, it will also focus on excerpts and critiques within framework of anti-racism.

Additionally, it comprises qualitative analysis and close reading of the poetic excerpts of the selected poets, to unveil the African literary aesthetics. This paper comprises of four sections: first provides introduction and basic foregrounding of the topic; second comprises of relevant research related to topic to substantiate the argumentation; third deals with relevant argumentation and literary analysis and fourth section encloses the conclusive remarks and enlightens new horizons for forth literary exploration.

2. Literature Review

Many prominent critics and scholars have conducted research and explored resistant qualities of the art. The goal of this foregrounding of research gap is to define the black aesthetics as per Baraka's and Angelou's poetic compositions. Additionally, it aims to provide role of socio-cultural impacts on evolution of literary aesthetics, particularly keeping in view black aesthetics by focusing on different critiques of the critics. A critic, Gayle, establishes that the variation in black aesthetics resulted due to transformation in political status of the blacks in white culture. 'The Renaissance writers lacked some aesthetics which gave birth to new aesthetics values in art afterwards' [12]. This wanting in art further produced new trends to follow, yet it takes its root from the late writers. It is apt to say that Harlem Renaissance though lacked some trends, yet defined the track for the black art. Undeniably, the African literature is ingrained in the gist of collective black struggles. Akin to this, Zander supports this idea of pre-imbedded resistance and contends that 'beauty in art can't be seized by only conceptual thoughts [22], in other words, it establishes that art relies on the pillars of the society for its creativity. It is to say that art producing during Harlem renaissance provides simplistic image of the blacks as compare to artistic compositions in the ear of the Civil Rights Movement. So, the revolutionary art becomes owing to shift in political ingredients of the society; black aesthetics is the result of recognition of black cultural imperatives or aesthetics. The poetic works of the selected poets pen-

pictures the black aesthetics and its historic evolution from complacent and pessimist depiction to active and revolutionist presentations in their poetic compositions.

In the same way, there also appears a 'connexion between literature and culture defines the intricacies of the art. So, reliance of the blacks on art for their self-expression is the expression of the black aesthetics. On one hand, it is worth noting that all critics focus on cultural stereotypes for natives' expressionism and on the other, provides the role of art for this efficient expression. Contrarily, Luke explores the dimension for inefficient self-depiction, particularly regarding the blacks' presentations. He asserts that the jumbles in the evolution of art with respect to time in history cause uncertainties and ambiguities in the real art depictions. Symbolically, it traces the reasons which led black art aesthetics from to present it in variegated themes and political aims. Moreover, it also brings forth the causes of variation and adaption of new aesthetics in Baraka' and Angelou's poetic compositions within the backdrop of colonial and anti-racism rift.

Contrary to abovementioned argument, McKay contradicts the affluence of black art; he puts forward the reason that it is unique black stereotypes that act as impenetrable fort in art. Therefore, the black art also becomes a racist discourse in general and particularly, it also acts as immutable black consciousness [14]. It pinpoints the reasons why a nuisance of inter-racism plagues the black art and black racism. Keeping in view the black art incongruities, the shift from Harlem Renaissance to the Black Art Movement takes place. This is the exigency which poetic compositions of the selected Afro-American poets endeavor to resolve. Therefore it establishes that it is this need which ingrained itself in art in the form representations of the historic and contemporary common ordeal of color people. It also sensitizes the need why heroic models presented in black art must be 'non-white' and to make art a canon to act as canonical discourse. Thus, it enunciates the reasons why the writings of the selected poets act as a paragon of black expressionism.

Aforementioned critiques and scholastic views regarding the black aesthetics, it becomes apparent that there is an evident research gap given in conception of art as resistance. This paper will endeavor to replenish this gap by employing different readings, selected theoretical framework and other critiques, centering on my contention that black aesthetics artistically surfaces up in the black art. Importantly, this paper is confined to literary analysis of selected excerpts of Angelou's and Baraka's poems, by only relying on discourse imperatives.

3. Discussion

Art, either in the form of literature or visual form, embodies the ideology and cultural aspects its producer carries in him/her. It is apt to mention that literature is not a craft, but it acts as a medium to reinforce, nullify and denounce certain aspects of the society. For instance, the distinction between orient and occident is created by the

literature on one hand [17] and on the other, the penchant and tendency to mimic western culture or euro-centrism is also created by art [10]. So, art produced by Afro-Americans functions to provide anti-racist discourse to denounce the dominant rhetoric of white supremacy. Hence, Baraka provides this anti-colonial and anti-racist ideology by using the weapon of art based on representation of particular aesthetics. Moreover, the analysis of his poetry will reveal the ways Baraka has catalyzed literary aesthetics to produce his compositions as resistant as Black Arts Movement and Civil Right Movement.

Being a revolutionary poet, Baraka's poetry evolved with burgeoning black rights movement; his initial poetry during Harlem Renaissance provides gentle and common black art form; his poems were confined as 'blues', 'songs' and specifically poems like *Blues Peoples*, *Ice Cubes* and *Black Peoples* which resemble the lucid depictions of Langston Hughes and historic appraisal of the blacks'. On the outburst of Black Right Movement and Civil Right Movement his poetry turned into new poetic form, poetry of strict anti-colonial, racist against whites and style transformed into the form of sermons and lectures with usage of poignant diction and imperative narrative style. It implies that anti-colonial discourse is the product of colonial discourse [10]; latter induced the idea of rights and civilization in the form of modernity. Thus, poetic aesthetics varies owing to shift in mood, tone and style. Most significantly, the poetry produced after Harlem Renaissance was referred as 'black poetry' or 'black art'. It is not wrong to argue that this black poetry is the general acceptance of shared blackness [20]. To acknowledge resistance is to 'acknowledge shared black experience' [11]. In addition, 'black art is real black aesthetics and is the offshoot of the black power concept' [16]. Thus, producing one discourse is the fragment of the other discourse [10].

It is commonly believed that Barak's poetry is repleted with political agenda, anti-racist ideology and black understating of the society. 'His poetry is an example of the black power; he espouses black discourse within political context to reinforce the blackness' [18]. For instance, his poem, *Black Art*, is an exquisite example of the revolutionary black aesthetics acting as resistance to colonial power or whiteness. There is rampant indication of ferocity, aggression and relentless quench for attainment of rights. The very first lines of the poem depict the aggressive tone, harsh settings and anti-racist conception: 'Poems are bullshit unless they are/ teeth or trees or lemons [3]. Aggression is necessary for Baraka to attain the common black rights, in other words, it asserts that dominant discourse incessantly becomes mutated owing to resistant discourse [10]. Resultantly, it gurgles up the fact that it is discourse which causes object-subjects dichotomy to produce new imperatives or aesthetics which accumulatively affects the socio-cultural settings at large. Moreover, the black consciousness or black discourse becomes the mode of self-expression and native crystallization. 'Whores! We want poems that kill/ Assassin poems, poems that shoot/ Guns' [3]. It also pinpoints the variation and transformation in discourse or art production due

to cultural suppression and colonial dominance.

Moreover, an excerpt from Baraka's poem, *Notes for a Speech*, supports the variation and evolution in Baraka's poetic sense. 'African Blues/doesn't know me anymore' [4], establishes that poetic aesthetics are real black aesthetic for him. His journey from Blues poems to blunt narrative poems like *Black Art* is similar to black's journey of his recognition of shared black consciousness or Black Nationalism [20]. In another poem, *Ka'Ba*, Baraka enunciates the common black consciousness [20]; he artistically puts forward the stereotypes of his black culture. Therefore, black consciousness provides the pen-picture of black struggle [20]. It is similar to discourse intervention to create 'new consciousness' or to redo dormant consciousness [15], albeit discourse formulation is reinforcement of a discourse [10] 'Our world is full of sound/ Our world is more lovely than anyone's' [5]; it also signifies the resistance opted by natives in the form of cultural supremacy. Surprisingly, not only it represents the symbolic dichotomy of occident and orient wherein one reinforces other by naturalization each other and vice-versa [17].

By the same token, the harsh and solemn tone emancipated in Baraka's poems not only underscore his critique of the 'whiteness' but it is more a decrying of early black movement like Harlem Renaissance which relied on soft and gentle resistant channels. It brings forth the fact that Baraka poetic sensibility that evolves with inculcation of revolutionary agenda for blacks. Baraka's poem, *Incident*, provides stark image of white brutalization, the marginalization of blacks and most dejectedly, the maltreatment toward the oppressed blacks projected by white colonizers. It succinctly establishes the scene of treachery inflicted upon the color people as, in poem; a black man has to taste unjust death owing to his black color. As he puts it as 'but he died in darkness darker than/ his soul and everything tumbled blindly with him dying' [6], it contends that colonizers have common justification of their maltreatment under the make slogans of civilization and common humanism. Similarly, Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* supports the same colonial slogans; Marlow has to witness all unjust governance and provide justifications by providing brutish presentation of the blacks [8]. And it establishes that it is a social construction of racial discrimination where 'whiteness' must stand for universality and 'blackness' symbolizes the inferiority. Thus, on one hand it unearths the common colonial rhetoric [10] and on the other, it depicts the institutionalized racism [20]. Additionally, this poem, *Incident*, resonates the themes of aggression, violence and strict anti-colonial narrative. Since Baraka watered the tenets of Black Arts Movement in this composition, it becomes apparent the black or African aesthetics add fuel to the depiction of black stereotypes. Thus, it is African aesthetics in the form of language, style, symbols and narrative style which provide this art a quality of being resistant.

This section of debate will focus on aesthetic of Angelou's poetry and will investigate how racial discrimination, injustice and misogyny affect the black women in particular. Specifically, Angelou has been hailed as hallmark and prominent artist for black activism. She uses his poetic

aesthetics to provide resistance to assault administered on the blacks; the canonical counter discourse can only dismantle the preconceived understanding of the blacks [21]. It elucidates that 'common cultural and national black identity must be calibrated to attain real black identity, shared black consciousness by rewriting and representing the blackness' [21]. Therefore, it implies that discourse behaves like real power where there are political disruptions; there is a counter discourse to maintain the real consciousness [10]. For example, Kipling's *White Man's Burden* is countered by Morel's *The Black Man's Burden*; former provides the discourse of colonizer or dominant one [13] whereas the latter is response to former to prove his colonial justification fallacious, by providing resistance.

Angelou's poem, *Harlem Hopscotch*, Angelou demonstrates the long struggle of black as resistance started in Harlem Renaissance; 'a paragon of lesson about resisting the unwanted' [2]. The narrator opts Harlem in this hopscotch game; literally speaking, it's an ordeal to face continuous ups and downs or continuous struggles or efforts: 'One foot down, hop! It's hot. Good things for ones that's got another jump, now to the left' [2]. This struggle is against racism and the blacks' marginalization. The words 'ups' and 'downs' depict the dynamic and fluctuating emotions and passions of the color people. Significantly, the metaphor of 'Harlem' provides the struggles and movements for attainment of black civility on one hand and on the other, 'patriarchal subjugation' refers to the over-empowerment of whites on blacks, it depicts acute racism. And most significantly the phrase 'since you black don't stick around' uncurtains the racial discrimination [20]. By providing the occult purposes and tactics of the whites, Angelou focuses on poetry to influence the masses by revealing the mege-political phenomenon of colonization. In this way, art stands as a resistance to unjust racial and cultural exploitation, in other words, it becomes an anti-discourse [10].

Keeping in view the abovementioned argument, Angelou's poem, *On the Pulse of Morning*, signifies the brutish and racist depiction of the blacks. 'Your mouths spilling words/Armed for slaughter' [2]. Then diction like 'spilling' and 'slaughter' depicts the loose presentation of blacks; they are presented as downtrodden, unmentioned, and inferior [10]. Whereas, Angelou relies on 'liberating discourse', she celebrates her blackness to provide anti-colonial in general and anti-racist stance in particular. 'Come, clad in peace and I will sing the songs' [2], significantly, this autonomy and reliance on the black stereotypes also act as resistance to racism [21]. And it is the usage of such soothing and artistic diction, narrative style and settings which make her poetic compositions as a channel for solace and self-expression amidst the turbulent atmosphere of white supremacist.

Likewise, ex-colonials have enrooted colonial ideologies in the blacks' minds to such extent that he post-colonial shocks turn them into psychologically colonized people [20]; it is pivotal to mention here that it is discourse which has been deep enrooted in the colonized masses that their mental perceptions become programmed [10]. Then, this indoctrinated white

supremacist belief deprives the masses from stable social status, it gives birth to common economical competition where white supremacy outshines the blackness. It is another name of institutionalized racism [20]. For instance, before the promulgation of the Human Rights Bill (1952), color people had been confined to the misfit status or subjected to low labor and economic exploitation. Angelou's *'Woman Work'* candidly establishes that black women were confined to domestic chores or to menial tasks: 'I gotta clean up this hut/Then see about the sick' [2]. Moreover, it explicates how black females are subjected to racial discrimination at domestic level in general and particularly, at familial level. Thus, by providing domestic symbols and minimal independence to black characters in her poetry, Angelou reinforces the imbedded resistance in her readers, making art a medium to resist the colonial subjugation and imperial exploitation. By mentioning social exploitation of the black women and injustice in sex and children rights, Angelou endeavors to produce a discourse wherein she could influence her black natives, and her poems serve her this penchant remarkably [10].

One of Angelou's poems, *Weekend Glory*, provides the intra-racism, shattered vision of self and also vividly depicts the effects of cross-cultural discourse encounters. The narrator puts as: 'my job at the plant/ain't the biggest bet/but I pay my bills/ and stay out of debt' [2]. It contends that racism between different black societies take place due to competition over economic resources [20]. As this competition furthers new segregations in the black society based on the availability and utilization of economic stability, the aforementioned argument establishes that working class of the black society also suffers from colonial and anti-colonial discourses equally; a feeling of double consciousness or double vision haunts them. They become homeless psychologically even being at home due to their mask of stable and liberated blacks, the shattered or ambiguous self [7]. In other words, it is apt to argue that intra-racism takes place owing to mini-discourses, thus this discourse intervention [15] reinforces colonial agenda of colonization either geographically or psychologically [10]. In a word, Angelou uses his poetic compositions to reinvigorate the black culture by unveiling the number of colonial tactics and provides resistance to dominant white discourse in her pieces of art.

4. Conclusion

Quite evidently, art acts as resistance in post-colonialism. Given that Angelou's and Baraka's extracted excerpts elucidate that art can never be devoid of any external and internal ideology; both poets develop a shield to their blackness and unearth the political aims achieved by the colonization. Their poetry succinctly demonstrate the post-colonial shocks in the form of discourse dominance, identity diaspora, rift between racism and anti-racism and most importantly, the role of art as discourse to resist, to cancel, to experience, and to reinforce the counter discourse.

This dissertation also explores the ways selected poets use diction, symbols, themes, settings, and narrative style to instill

the desired understanding of the black culture. Firstly, the poetic compositions of Amiri Baraka provide the revolutionary capability of the art. The first section of discussion deals with role of poetry in evocation of emotions, revocation of forgotten heritage and invokes struggle for rights in black people; Baraka's revolutionary and jingoistic poetry, by using declarative narrative style, harsh and bold diction and sluggish settings to add fuel to dissemination of revolutionary ideas through his poetry. Along with him, Angelou uses themes, symbols, domestic and social symbols to pinpoint the weaknesses among black people. In a word, both selected poets present black people's shared experience through their poetry and their aesthetic sense evolved with transforming black aesthetics. In other words, it is not wrong to say that black aestheticism is manifested in and propagated through their poetry. Thus, their art unanimously act as resistance to colonial rule and provide resistant shield to black culture or the shared black consciousness. Moreover, black aestheticism is an amalgamation of artistic expression intertwined with psychosocio-cultural imperatives; it is being depicted by black art either lingual or audio-visual form.

Henceforth, this research papers calls into question the role of art in any society. It also explores the ways colonial discourse and anti-colonial discourse encounter to renounce and support the racism and anti-racism respectively. It establishes that art be African or American functions on the basis of its productive elements. Additionally, it brings forth the fact that humans' resources, man power and worldly exploitation are the main products of colonization, yet it extends itself to psychological dynamic of colonized masses; it undeniably infuses power and high-esteem to Afro-Americans or suppressed Negroes to channelize their art in order to self-express them. It contends that art has always been utilized as a nuke or medium to re-orient, re-structure, and to re-discover any sector of human life and history has witnessed that how art or literature took the form of resistance and gave birth to new society or culture. Moreover, this paper also enlightens new dimensions for forth literary exploration by keeping in view the tendency of art to act as resistance in post-colonialism.

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