



RESEARCH PAPER

Foucaultian Discourse Analysis of Amiri Baraka's *Great Goodness of Life* (1969)

Faiza Zaheer

Assistant Professor Department of English Forman Christian College (A Chartered University),
Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

Corresponding Author faizazaheer@fccollege.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

The major objective of this research is to explore and analyze the language, segregation and social and political discourses in Imamu Amiri Baraka's play *The Great Goodness of Life* (1969). This play also focuses on the cultural isolation, Black creativity, African American status, and sensibility of black Individual. Baraka/ LeRoi Jones reveals the status of black individual in twentieth century American society. In this play, Baraka presents two major characters Court Royal (An African American man) and the Voice of the Judge (an invisible character) represent the contradictions in American society. He presents the issues and problems faced by the Blacks in the segregated social and judicial system of America. This is qualitative research and Michel Foucault's (1926-1984) Critical Discourse Analysis has been applied to this text which would help the reader to understand the social and political discourses offered by Baraka.

Keywords: Black Individual, Cultural Isolation, Dichotomy, Discourse Analysis, Language, Surroundings

Introduction

Amiri Baraka (1934-2014) is one of the most prolific African American playwrights, essayists, and poets. His artistic expression is both controversial and creative as he represents. Amiri Baraka also known as Le Roi Jones was born in Newark, New Jersey in 1934. He got a scholarship at Rutgers University but after experiencing cultural isolation, he was transferred to Howard University in 1951. He taught at different universities like University of Buffalo, Yale University, George Washington University, San Francisco University & Columbia University. LeRoi Jones changes his name from Jones to Amiri Baraka in 1967, "It was [Hajj] Heesham who gave me the name Ameer Barakat (the Blessed Prince).[...] Later, under [Maulana] Karenga's influence, I changed my name to Amiri, Bantuizing and Swahilizing the first name and the pronunciation of the last name as well.[...] hence Baraka"(Le Roi Jones, p. 376).The major themes in the writings of Amiri Baraka/ LeRoi Jones are the state of African people in American society, political status of African Americans in the sociopolitical American structures and the sensibility of black men towards Black Nationalism and the racism prevalent in the American society. Amiri Baraka focuses in one of his essays:

To understand that you are black in a society where black is an extreme liability is one thing, but to understand that it is the society that is lacking and is impossibly deformed because of this lack, and not yourself, isolates you even more from that society' (Baraka, 1995, p.185)

Baraka, in the above-mentioned excerpt, presents three different issues embedded in the American society; first one is the status of black man in American society, secondly the deplorable condition of American society, and thirdly the understanding of repulsive presence of racism in the American Society. Baraka's response to racism in the American society and the racism which is built into the very roots of the American culture. In the preface to *Woza Africa*, Baraka establishes this stance, "The struggle's intensification

made it necessary to unveil the people themselves, their own voices and the tearful accents of their personal tragedies—brought together to make national and international tragedy” (Baraka, p. xiv). Baraka, in his writings, makes a strong stance that black people should understand their status in a racist society and should voice their personal tragedies so the others could understand the agonies of this deprived strata of the society. Baraka’s work exposes the killing, death, murder of African American people to the American stage. The purpose of this research is to do Foucaultian Critical Discourse Analysis of Amiri Baraka’s play *The Great Goodness of Life* (1969) to understand the multilayered discourses offered by Baraka to explicate the social and political status of Black man in American society. This paper also explores the usage of diction in this play to analyze the ugliness of racism prevalent in the American society.

Literature Review

Amiri Baraka’s essays published in *Home: Social Essays* (1966) focus on his understanding of Black culture, Black Nationalism and Black ideology. These essays help the reader to explore and expose Baraka’s chameleonic approach towards African American ideology and intellectuality. Michel Foucault’s essay “The Order of Discourse” (1971) focuses on the idea, application and types of discourse that could be helpful to understand their interpretations. The discourses discussed and explored by Foucault delineate their social, cultural, and political significance in society. Kimberly Benston in his book points out the various characteristics of Baraka’s poetry and dramaturgy . He also puts forward the Baraka’s approach towards white America and the black people who should understand their social and political status. This book has been a useful source to explore the various aspects of Baraka as a playwright. Roland Barth’s essay “Death of Author” has been a helpful source to analyse the characters in Baraka’s *Great Goodness of Life*. As Barth elucidates in this essay that its reader’s job to put forward the interpretation of the text. With the help of this essay, different discourses offered by the Baraka’s play have been analyzed.

Material and Methods

This is a qualitative research as the different aspects of Baraka’s play *Great Goodness of Life* have been explored and analyzed. For this purpose, Michel Foucault’s (1926-1984) Critical Discourse Analysis has been applied to Baraka’s play to understand the black ideology and multiple interpretations within the text.

Results and Discussion

Gerio Gafio Watts points out, “Baraka is admired, hated, feared, dismissed, adored, and despised” (Watts, p.10). According to Gafio, Baraka has been and is still controversial as on many occasions, he protested the oppression, racism, and hatred but at the same he is accused of nurturing hate. Everyone knows that race, racism, marginalization, hatred towards color and religion are not the new themes in this world. Yet these themes and issues have been understood, discussed, analyzed, and examined differently by different writers and through different mediums. In some cases, these issues and the writers, who raised their voice against these injustices, become politically and socially controversial. Amiri Baraka/ LeRoi Jones can be included in this category. Through his writings, Baraka intends to create a strong and rebellious black identity which knows how to use its strength and black national spirit. Baraka seems to use the medium of literature as a political apparatus. Baraka’s literary point of view challenges the deep-rooted racism in the society.

For Baraka, theatre can be taken as a revolutionary institution to expose and expound the social injustices, racism and dislocation faced by the black people in American society. His theatre not only presents the chaos created by the superiority complex of white people but also the oral African tradition. There are three stages of Baraka’s literary career; the first one is a bohemian stage which was under the influence of avant- garde and white

beat poets. The second is about the complete submission to Black nationalism, Black culture, traditions, and Black Literature while the third stage is to accept the Marxist ideology. Sørensen points out, "an Africanist, (Inter)Nationalist, Marxist, and masculinist dissident, critiquing both majority/hegemonic discourses and most liberal-humanist leftwing producing counter-discourses in the USA over the last fifty years" (Sorenson, 2016,77). Baraka is a polemical writer about black literature and culture as his major focus is political representation. Baraka considers himself as a revolutionary as he himself asserts:

I know I've always tried to be a revolutionary. That's been consistent. From the time I could open my mouth in terms of talking about art I've wanted to talk about change and revolution. I think the methods and ways I've seen have changed as my own understanding has deepened. (Baraka, 1966, p.2)

Baraka's understanding and approach towards politics transforms his literary point of view bitter, revengeful and violent. To him art is a political practice, and he makes this very opulent in his revolutionary theatre. Baraka wants people to understand his point of view and approach towards a white political set up of America. To him, political theatre is a platform for revolutionary theatre. He believes that this theatre exposes and explicates strong human feelings, extreme emotions, and absolute rejection of black man in front of white political influence. Baraka believes that black theatre must depict, describe, and interpret the predicament of blackness:

The Revolutionary Theatre must EXPOSE! Show up the insides of these humans, look into black skulls. White men will cower before this theatre because it hates them. Because they themselves have been trained to hate. The Revolutionary Theatre must hate them for hating. For presuming with their technology to deny the supremacy of the Spirit. They will all die because of this. (Baraka, 1966, p.236)

According to Baraka, black theatre must expose the agony and angst of black people and he wants blacks to exhibit their hatred and do respond violently towards violence. The Revolutionary Theatre of Baraka does not bother to focus on something spiritual and peaceful rather it wants to destroy the whole social set up and ideas. Baraka believes that the Revolutionary theatre is the theatre of the suppressed so it must be loud, it must scream at the top of its voice, and it must be heard:

.. It must Accuse and Attack because it is a theatre of Victims. It looks at the sky with the victims' eyes and moves the victims to look at the strength in their minds and their bodies.... The Revolutionary Theatre is shaped by the world and moves to reshape the world. (Baraka, 1966, p. 210)

Baraka propounds this idea that Black theatre must not be defensive rather it must come forward to attack, to accuse because this theatre talks about the victim not about the tyrant. Baraka believes black expression should show resistance not submission, should be violent not docile and should destroy but should not wait for devastation. Baraka is an iconoclast; his mission is to reshape the world with strong and powerful resistance. His Revolutionary play *The Great Goodness of Life* (1969) does proclaim the same notion of revolt and destruction. This play also exposes the victimization of black man, Court Royal, in a racist white society where he accepts all the crimes he has never committed. This play is about a middle-aged black man Court Royal who has been working in a post office as a supervisor for good thirty-five years. He is staying in an old log cabin and has nothing to do with anything bad. Yet, he is summoned by the 'Voice' of an invisible man, and he is accused of harboring a wanted criminal. This is where the play begins, and Court Royal is quite dumbfounded as he has no idea about whom that 'Voice' is talking about. This play has been given the subtitle; a coon show. The coon caricature is considered one of the most offensive and disdainful representation of black people. The word 'coon' is the abbreviation of word 'raccoon' which is a dehumanizing embodiment of black people. In fact, there used to be two

presentations of black race in America during slavery; first one was “coon” and second one was “sambo”. Sambo is an embodiment of an elderly happy, contented, and faithful slave, whereas coon is not happy with his circumstance but too lazy to take any action. On stage and in cinema, coons are presented as the repulsive black creatures. Donald Bogle, a cinematic historian criticizes the representation of coons in American culture:

Before its death, the coon developed into the most blatantly degrading of all black stereotypes. The pure coons emerged as no-account niggers, those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language. (Bogle, 1994, p. 8)

Though Bogle has said this about the movie coon, Stepin Fetchit (1902-1985), and his character in the cinema yet this statement is pivotal to understand the character, status of the coon in the American society during slavery but also focuses on the indignation he used to face in the society. Coon is considered an unreliable, lazy and a good for nothing creature. Baraka has made use of these characteristics in his play *The Great Goodness of Life* while presenting the character of ‘Voice’ because the voice of the judge judges Court Royal as a coon and a slave not as a part of the society. At many places in the play, the judge orders Court Royal to shut up:

VOICE

Shut up, nigger...

VOICE

I told you to shut up, nigger...

VOICE

Black lunatic. I said shut up. I’m not going to tell you again. (Baraka, 1969, p.59)

This is how Baraka depicts hatred, indignation, and repulsion of society towards black people as this play also presents the movement of Klu Klux Klan which was founded in 1915 in Georgia to maintain white supremacy. Baraka, in this play, focuses on the characters of white and black people, and represents the crisis black society is facing in white supremacist American society. In this play, expression and words have been repeated not to make this manuscript mundane but to show the pressure and crisis faced by the protagonist, Court Royal. He is forced by the Voice to accept the crime he did not commit. The tone of the Voice (Judge’s Voice) is spiteful, furious, and repulsive. This aspect ignites a crisis in the play where Court Royal has no idea what’s going on and how to plead not guilty. In this regard, Kimberly Benston points out:

Baraka has always written within a sense of imminent crisis: his work derives much of its driving power from the assumption that the apocalypse is always about to be, that its arrival requires nothing other than the conjunction of changes inevitable trajectories and his audience's decision finally to shed foolish delusions about the world and their own motivations. (Benston, 1976, p.194)

Baraka does not create a crisis in this play rather he mirrors the crisis as he asserts that people should abandon the illusions and try to be realistic about life and white civilization. According to Kimberly, Baraka wants black man to take crisis as a challenge and he should understand the disaster that is very much present in the lives of people.

While understanding Baraka’s play, the reader comes across multiple discourses developed by the Voice (The Judge), Court Royal and other characters in the play. There are

two major characters in the play; one is the Voice and the other Court Royal and, in this play, there is not only the issue of racism and the conflict between the black man and blackness. Nilgun Anadolu Okur in her article focuses on the blackness verses whiteness and black vs blackness:

Called by its playwright A Coon Show, *Great Goodness of Life* combined allegory with morality. The lesson to be learned here, as in most of Baraka's plays, is that African Americans unintentionally kill the black spirit if they are not sincerely involved in discovering and nurturing their blackness and their children's blackness. (Okur, 1989, p.17)

Multiple discourses are incorporated by Baraka in this play to expose the deplorable characteristics of blackness. He wants black people to understand their place, space, and roots. Through the exposition of different black characters in his plays, Baraka propounds the lack of understanding on the part of black people as they are unable to discover themselves and fail to know what their responsibilities are as the representative of black nationalism. According to Okur, Baraka's focus is not only the racism but the ignorance of black people towards blackness.

This confrontation between the black people and blackness creates a strong discourse to understand the other discourses which complement each other in Baraka's play. According to Sandra Taylor, Discourse Analysis:

is particularly appropriate for critical ...analysis because it allows a detailed investigation of the relationship of language to other social processes, and of how language works within power relations. CDA provides a framework for a systematic analysis... (Taylor, 2004, p.36)

In defining Critical Discourse Analysis, Taylor wants the reader to understand the processes involved in critical discourse analysis and their relationship to language. Taylor establishes a connection between linguistic discourse and the multiple social and political discourses. Foucault does not define Discourse analysis as the meaning of some idea rather it focuses on the interpretation of ideas as she says, "in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a... number of procedures" (Foucault, 1981, p. 52). Foucault asserts that discourse is based on multiple discourses and those multiple discourses are construed from various social, political, and cultural perspectives. Foucault believes in speculation of the text and to interpret the text differently, as Roland Barthes points out, "the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination" (Foucault, 1977, p. 148). The major point is what the text offers and how the reader approaches what is offered. Baraka's play *Great Goodness of life* offers certain multifaceted themes while presenting various characters. For example, the character of Attorney Breck in the play acts like a puppet:

Attorney Breck

Mr. Royal, look at me. (Grabs him by the shoulders) I am John Breck. (Laughs) Your attorney and friend. And I say plead guilty.

COURT ROYAL

John Bre . . . what? (He looks at the attorney closely.) Breck. Great God, what's happened to you? Why do you look like this? ATTORNEY BRECK

Why? Haha, I've always looked like this, Mr. Royal. Always. (Now another voice, strong, young, begins to shout in the darkness at court.) (1969, Baraka, p.53)

This part of the play is very crucial to understand the characters of Court Royal and his Attorney Breck, and Attorney Breck is acting like a puppet. He cannot do anything on his own and is controlled by both the ignorance of black people and the racism of white society. Towards the end of the play, while admitting that he is guilty, Court Royal shows the idea of Black survival. In this play, "there is the hegemony of dominant discourse" (James. C. Scott, p.57), and this hegemony forces the Court Royal to change his statement and admit that he is guilty. Even when Attorney Breck shows his reluctance towards the plea of Court Royal and leaves the stage while ridiculing the panic-stricken protagonist:

ATTORNEY BRECK

As you wish, your honor. Goodbye, Mr. Royal. (He begins to crawl off.)

Goodbye, dead sucker! Hahahaha. (Waving hands as he crawls off and laughing)
Hahahaha, ain't I a bitch ... I mean ain't I? (Exits). (Baraka, 1969, p.54)

He leaves the stage and makes Court more miserable, and his discourse propounds this insensitive expression for black people towards their race and white people towards black stratum of society. Court Royal is confused after facing this kind of justice. In this regard, Kimberly Benston points out:

The Blacks involves the condemnation of white society in a series of suffocating illusions while envisaging a triumphant Negro rebellion as reality. *Great Goodness of Life*, on the other hand, is an accusatory exposition of a segment of the black community (Benston, 1976, p.216)

Through the character of Court Royal, Baraka portrays the issues of black community and the cruel exposition of their social behaviors towards each other. The discourse set by Baraka explores the dichotomy between truth and lie, reality and ambiguity, and fixity and sordidness. As Foucault points out:

the discourses of true and false... the correlative formation of domains and objects... the verifiable, falsifiable discourses that bear on them, and ... the effects in the real to which they are linked." (Foucault, 1980, p.237)

Foucaultian point of view is quite prevalent while understanding the black experience in Baraka's discourse and the scenario in which they try to exist. Court Royal is both character and type as he had a comfortable life before the trial but during and after the trial incident, he became totally a different person. During the trial, a drunk black woman has been brought in the scenario by the hoods (the members of Klu Klux Klan) and the punishment she has been given is that her body will be grinded, and the paste of her grinded in to poison jelly will be smeared on her daughter's head. The black woman does not speak a word, but she is abused by the Hoods physically. As Deleuze points out, "statement always defines itself by establishing a specific link with something else that lies on the same level as itself... almost inevitably, it is something foreign, something outside" (Deleuze, 1988, p. 11). Deleuze focuses on the inevitability of the expression, establishing a different aspect of discourse and this discourse becomes an outsider. Baraka focuses on the black point of view. Baraka's Court Royal is a representation of the semi-conscious black character who fails to comprehend and has got completely numbed in the white supremacist society. According to Baraka:

To enter into the mainstream of American society the Negro must lose all identity as a Negro. He must even consume a common cultural liability, and when the time comes for this white society to die, he will be asked to die with it, and for the same reasons it will die. (Baraka,1966, p.138)

Baraka's approach towards the black culture propounds the black individuality and the fractured black expression. In this above-mentioned Baraka's statement, there is something challenging in his approach and that is a different cultural presentation. Court Royal unconsciously has killed his own blackness, his nationalism and de-rooted himself. The Voice in the play mirrors the condition of Court Royal who has submitted himself to the situation and is ready to surrender. As Foucault points out, "things...already murmuring meanings which our language has only to pick up" (Foucault, 1981 p. 65). Foucault focuses on the point that language focuses on the multiplicity of interpretations which are not fixed and can be changed with a different perception. Baraka presents the multiple expressions while presenting the characters of Court Royal and the Judge. Baraka shares the discourse of Judge:

VOICE

The rite must be finished. This ghost must be lost in cold space. Court Royal, this is your destiny. This act was done by you a million years ago. This is only the memory of it. This is only a rite. You cannot kill a shadow, a fleeting bit of light and memory...This is your destiny, and your already lived-out life. Instruct, Court Royal, as the centuries pass, and bring you back to your natural reality... (Baraka, 1966, p.62)

Voice in the *Great Goodness of life* makes the Court Royal realize whatever chaos has happened has been his reality and this will never be changed. This is not only the fate of Court Royal but the destiny of whole black race in the American society. Baraka exposes the racism of American society and the submission of black people to American segregation.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the Amiri Baraka's play *Great Goodness of Life* and twentieth century social discrimination keeping in view Foucaultian Discourse Analysis to explore and expose the American society in general and American racism and segregation in particular. Different aspects of play have been discussed to explicate the black expressions, black nationalism, and black culture to understand the black response to segregation, white supremacy, and black subverted expression.

References

- (1966) "What does nonviolence mean?" pp. 133-154, in *Home: Social Essays*. New York: William Morrow.
- (1966). "The Revolutionary Theatre" in *Home: Social Essays* New York: Morrow. pp. 210-12.
- (1969) "*Great goodness of life*," in *Four Black Revolutionary Plays*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill
- (1995) *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. (1963) Edinburgh: Payback Press
- Baraka, A. (1984). *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*. NY: Freundlich.
- Barthes, R. (1977a). The Death of the Author. In *Image - Music - Text* (pp. 142-148). New York: Hill and Wang.
- Benston, K. (1976). *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Bogle, D. (1994). *Toms, coons, mulattoes, mammies, and bucks: An interpretive history of Blacks in American films* (New 3rd ed.). New York, NY: Continuum.
- Deleuze, G. (1988). *Foucault*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Duma, N. (1986). *Woza Afrika! An Anthology of South African Plays*. Ny: George Braziller xiii-xvi.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *POWER/KNOWLEDGE: Selected Interviews and Other Writings* (1972-1977). Colin Gordon (Ed). Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper (Trans.). NY: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1981). "The Order of Discourse." In R. Young (Ed) (1981), *Untying the text: a post-structural anthology* (pp. 48- 78). Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Okur, A, N.1989. "Drama as Social Criticism: Assessing Baraka's *Great Goodness of Life*." *Journal of Black Studies*, (19) 4. pp. 411-421.Sage Publication.
- Scott, J. C. "Domination, Acting, and Fantasy." In *The Paths to Domination, Resistance, and Terror*. Ed. Carolyn Nordstrom and JoAnn Martin. Berkeley: U of California.
- Sørensen, B (2016). Dissent as Race War: The Strange Case of Amiri Baraka. *Dissent! Refracted* B: 77.
- Taylor, S. (2004). Researching educational policy and change in 'new times': using critical discourse analysis. *Journal of Education Policy*, 19(4), 433-451.
- Watts, J. G. (2000). *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual*. New York: New York University Press.