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Amiri Baraka's "In Memory of Radio": Marxist Dialectics

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ABSTRACT: The paper discusses the dialectics of Baraka's Marxism in relation to "In Memory of Radio," one of his best poems written during his Beat period and published in 1962. Though much of his poetry written during this period is judged by critics as having nothing to do with Marxism and thus no attempt is to be made to discuss his poetic production in the light of this literary theory, other literary critics prove that the seeds of establishing himself as a Marxist poet can find its roots in his Beat poetry prior to his transition to other two phases, namely the phase of Black nationalism and the phase of Marxist-Leninism.

KEYWORDS: Althusser, Beat, dialectics, Evil, Ideology, 'In Memory of Radio', Marxist,

I. INTRODUCTION:AMIRI BARAKA AND MARXIST DIALECTICS

Much debate is aroused by critics on whether Amiri Baraka gets influenced by Marxism before or after 1974. Though the majority has reached a universal agreement that Marxism has influenced him since 1974, many other critics consider this date with skepticism. However, by tracing Baraka's creative output during 1961-1969, Lee in his book, *The Aesthetics of LeRoi Jones/ Amiri Baraka: The Rebel Poet* argues, a Marxist influence on Baraka can be perceived. Lee has realized this after considering Baraka's 1969 talk "Capitalism and its decadent materialism," which Lee sees, is "focused on the petty bourgeoisie and how capitalism was suffocating the proletariat."[1] In spite of Baraka's denial that his poetry has not been influenced by Marxism prior to 1970s, Baraka's first collection of verse, *Preface To A Twenty Volume Suicide Note* along with his present works, are based on Marxist aesthetics. [1]Marx's influence on Barakian aesthetics is conveyed by the role he, through his poems, plays in examining an oppressive society in which one class or race [the white bourgeois] rules another."[1] In support of Lee's viewpoint regarding the date that Marxism takes hold on Baraka, Lloyd W. Brown makes the following significant statement: "As in other aspects of Barak's writing the ideological shifts are evident in the poetry go hand in hand with a fundamental themes that remains constant throughout: that is whether he is inspired by a vague radical outrage or by ethnic revolutionism, Baraka's insights are always rooted in a deep-seated contempt for what he sees as the defects of Western culture as a whole, and American society in particular. Moreover, despite the interesting alienation from all aspects of white American and the West, the poetry continues to show signs of Baraka's early association with nonblack artists"[1]

On the other hand, William Harris in his remarkable achievement, *The Poetry and Poets of Amiri Baraka:The Jazz Aesthetic* also argues that Baraka's shift to Marxism in 1970s in not sudden:" It is important to realize that Baraka's current Marxist revolutionary nationalism both extends and negates his cultural nationalism. He is still committed to revolutionary revolt, but is now defined in Marxist terms; the enemy is no longer the white man, but the capitalist state… Marxism has not destroyed Barak's belief in autonomous black state and the uniqueness of black culture; it has only given him a framework for seeing the black struggle for independence in economic and materialist terms… Therefore, his shift from cultural nationalist to revolutionary Marxist was not as abrupt as it has often been seen: he has carried over the most revolutionary elements of his cultural nationalism into his Marxism.[1]

Another experience that gives shape to Barak's Marxist aesthetics, Lee continues, is Baraka's 1960 visit to Cuba which makes him "excited about an emerging Cuban nationalism based on socialistic and communist foundation"[1] Furthermore, Baraka's opening section of *Home* shows how much his black nationalism is interrelated to Marxism: " I have been a lot of places in my time, and done a lot of things… And there is a sense of the Prodigal about my life that begs to be resolved. But one truth anyone reading these pieces ought to get is the sense of movement –the struggle in myself, to understand where and who I am and to move with that understanding … And these moves, most time unconscious … seem to me to have been always toward the thing I had coming into the world, with no sweat: my blackness. [1]

II. MARXIST THEORIES AND BARAKA'S "IN MEMORY OF RADIO"

One of the French Marxist philosophers who has his own contribution to Marxism in the 1960s is Louis Pierre Althusser (1918-1990). Althusser has introduces the concept of relative autonomy which he relates to the study of arts. Unlike early Marxist thinkers, he argues that arts (including literature) has a degree of dependence on economic forces, meaning metaphorically speaking that arts can be capitalized to propagate certain ideology, set of values etc. Paying attribute to Althusser's contribution, Ferrette L. argues that it is impossible to interpret literature and culture in a capitalist society without the acknowledgement of Althusser's."[2] Defining ideology, Althusser says that it "is a system (possessing its logic and proper rigor) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts according to the case) endowed with an existence and a historical role at the heart of a given society"[3] Therefore, culture (including literature) is a crucial vehicle of the values which underpins the status quo in any society. Moreover, these values are usually implicit and often unrecognized. This leads Goldstein to affirm that "the economic infrastructure still influences ideological practices, but only in the last instance," [3] which is responsible for art to have relative autonomy. With Althusser's introduction of production theory through which he asserts that literature should not be strictly relegated to the superstructure, art comes to "inspire revolution,"[4] Moreover, Althusser has made reference to a process he calls "interpellation or hailing the subject," (Ibid.) whereby the dominant hegemony or a prevailing ideology, through its force, can form the individual's (subject's) identity [4]

A second pioneer French critic is Pierre Macherey (1938-). Like Althusser who has revised Marxist theory (rejecting the base/ superstructure model and embracing a more implicit interrelated theory), the former student of Althusser, Macherey has developed "Marxist theories by using the concept of post-structuralism," [4] challenging the conventional method readers read texts. He in his remarkable book, *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966) points to the idea that there is a difference between the meanings authors say and what they actually write. Due to this consideration, he proposes what he calls "an alternative reading of texts,"[4] so that readers can be able to "recognize the multiple ideologies at work in themselves and in their texts."[4]

A third innovative post-Althusserian Marxist critic is Raymond Williams (1921-1988). Williams, in his work, *Culture and Society*, has pointed out that culture, authorial ideology, and arts in all its forms together get "involved in a complex series of relationships that shape and develop each other,"[4]and pass their way into the lived experience of a person's everyday life.

As a poem, LeRoi Jones's (later known as Amiri Baraka after his conversion to Islam in 1968) "In Memory of Radio" is one of the poems that appear in his first Beat collection of poetry, *Preface To A Twenty Volume Suicide Note* that he published in 1961. Published during the Beat phase, Baraka's poems among which "In Memory of Radio" are written with the intention of expressing his "antagonism toward the mainstream American culture."[5] Though written during that phase when Baraka has not yet embraced black nationalism, acted as the cofounding leader of Black Arts Movement(1965-1976), or even adopted international Marxism, Baraka's "In Memory of Radio" is viewed as a critique of the Marxist ideologies, resonating with his "great desire and a yearning for a more meaningful and orderly world,"[5]where he can no longer be entrapped metaphorically speaking, in the "evil [lurking] in the hearts of men. "(line 25) It is around this line that the poem revolves thematically. This line explains Baraka's use of the title which seemingly is taken as "an elegy to radio and all the pop-culture idols that came from the industry of radio entertainment."[2]However, this is not the case. By referring to different radio programs (whether religious or comic in nature), Baraka unleashes the hidden and malicious Western white ideologies that these programs tend to serve: to formulate the identity of African Americans, making them accept the ideals and values preached by the white dominant class. Through this poem, Baraka "questions middle-class tastes, popular culture and America's seemingly unquestioning acceptance of technology."[6]Innocent and ignorant of the destructive impact of the radio which he first praises as a new technological means of sharing information and getting entertainment, Baraka, having got enlighten as he moves from childhood stage to adulthood, shows how these insidious programs are in essence evil, carrying and sending corrupt ideology so as "to justify the mass murder of over sixty million innocent African slaves during hundred years in the history of slavery in US."[2] Thus the poem's title, one can infer, is cleverly used by Baraka to sugar coat this very intention. Put like this, the title of the poem can be interpreted not only as "an elegy to the radio, a nostalgic reminiscence about its [attractive] effect," [6] but also an elegy whereby he can lament his childhood that he and his people lose "duped by what they see, hear, and read."[6] Using Louis Althusser's terminology, Baraka (perhaps he is the speaker of the poem) is showing how unaware as an innocent child acts as "always already subject"[2] and subjected to the ideological state apparatus (ISA) represented by media and acted "as he is acted by the system."[6] With his subjection, this ideology enables him to "perceive the reality he lives in,"[7] making "his existence intelligible."[7]

Baraka begins his poem with its speaker asking a rhetorical question "who has ever stopped to think of the divinity of Lamont Cranston?"(line1) Clear from this line that the speaker idealizes Lamont Cranston whom Baraka himself considers as "crime fighting superhero of pulp novels, comic books, and radio shows," [6] running during his childhood in the 1930s and 1940s. Cranston is the alter ego of the Shadow who is presented as divine and super powerful in the sense that he can transform the world by fighting and eradicating evil. Opposed to the status quo, the speaker or Baraka has aligned himself with his friend, Jack Kerouac, one of the writers of the Beat movement of 1950s who writes about Jazz and Blues and has affected so much Baraka's early writings, setting himself consciously or not apart from these people who start listening to radio stations like WCBS(a New York City station)

and Kate Smith, a 19th century popular singer who supports mainstream taste with her patriotic song "God Bless America," for having felt no attraction to either.

In the second stanza, the poet again begins with a rhetorical question "What can I say?"(line 5) suggesting that he can speak no more about this and soon finding enough replay to his raised question with the following: "It is better to have loved and lost / Than to put linoleum in your living rooms?" (lines 6-7) These two lines, before he has played on are taken from Lord Alfred Tennyson's "In Memoriam:" "Tis better to have loved and lost/ than never to have loved at all." Re-appropriating Tennyson's words, Baraka intends to critique the taste of middle-class (Baraka's petty bourgeoisie) whose taste is associated by the poet with linoleum the middle-class use in their living rooms, meaning perhaps that it is better to have loved some radio programs (like the Shadow) that preach the white middle-class values and the mainstream American culture and then denounce that and then getting self-knowledge and moral insight for being gulled than to be "hooked by a radio advertisement into buying a product. ([6]

In stanza three, the poet refers to Mandrake _"the Magician, the hero of a comic strip of the 1940s and 1950s written by Lee Falk and Fred Fredericks." [6] When he with a playful tone asks:" Am I a sage or something/ Mandrake's hypnotic gesture of the week?"(lines 8-9) In relating this question which is about his poetic authority that he doesn't trust, to Mandrake's performance of magic or hypnosis, Baraka is to imply that the radio programs too are to be suspected because they don't necessarily show the truth. This is true of his endorsement of the role of making believe world which is again similar to the radio show Let's Pretend. Like the magic performed by Mandrake, Lloyd W. Brown argues, the intimate relationship developed between the listeners of radio with the radio characters is false or is a closeness based on pretense: "The figure's familiar attributes (the hypnotic gesture and the powers of invisibility, reinforces that sense of a wonderful (magical) emotional intimacy which is intrinsic to the experience of listening to radio: the listener develops private relationships with radio characters precisely because the latter's invisibility demands an imaginative participation from the listener, and thereby enhances the intimacy of relationship. "[6]

However, unlike the Shadow who appears to the speaker as an attractive figure for his possession of good and evil qualities, Let's Pretend and Red Lantern shows are evil, having foregrounded their 'pretend qualities[6] with the first dramatizing "the Grimm's fairy-tales for radio"[6] and the latter talking about a character named Red Lantern who in children's show, Land of the Lost, is fictionally depicted as a fish leading "kids down below the sea to search for their lost toys."[6] Of the conflict between good and evil which characterizes Baraka's works, William Harris says: " In Baraka, there has always been a battle between the imagination and the real world. Baraka was attracted to the world of imagination because there could be anyone and have anything he wanted."[6]

In stanza three, Baraka references to Oral Roberts and Bishop Fullon J. Sheen, two radio icons and famous televangelists who have "used the radio to pursue religious, political, and financial powers,"[6] i.e. they capitalize the radio and utilize it as a means to pretend what they are not to get material benefits. Unlike Oral Roberts, the faith healer and the supposedly religious preacher, the poet says that he is unable to "duplicate [his] healing spells,"[6] disavowing "the promises of earthly happiness and salvation that the Catholic evangelist Fullon J. Sheen regularly has made over the radio."[6]

In the fifth stanza, Baraka presents the poem's climax: "the most evil form of hypnosis"[6] propagated by the radio. The poem refers to Adolf Hitler to signify that the radio is exploited for political ideologies. The radio serves evil ends of bloody figures: the "spread of [Hitler's] message of war, conquest, and genocide."[6] and "the use of the gaschamber"[6] by Goodwin 'Goody 'Night, the governor of Cslifornia (1953-1959) at the time the poem was published. Convinced that there is no space for true humanity and justice, Baraka has made reference to these two powerful men whom Baraka regards and realizes "as the evil sorcerers of mass media."[6]

In the seventh stanza and the last, Baraka points to the dual nature of human nature which is true of the word love. Spelled backward, love will be 'an evol word, ' a word that no one except the Blacks know for they know the real meaning of social instability.[6] This is one of the hidden meanings that Baraka's racial poem, though masked as the title, reveals. Though Baraka has made no direct reference to racism, his "In Memory of Radio" can be "read as a statement that Blacks living in a white society have a special ability for the divination of evil," [6] which finds its reflection in lines twenty two and twenty four with Baraka referring again to the Shadow as the one who "has keen insight, the divinity to detect evil."[6]

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, Baraka's "In Memory of Radio" is written with Baraka influenced by Marxism. Though implicit, the message it carries is Marxist in essence. Moreover, the poem references to and criticizes the two political bloody leaders from history in addition to other powerful and imaginary characters from pop culture whom Baraka puts in one basket because all of them symbolize falseness and evil. By speaking of evil and pretense, Baraka shows how the radio is capitalized to propagate white middle-class ideologies and to hail the subjects (African-Americans in the case of the poem) often during childhood stage (innocence) to shape accordingly their identities.

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