

Intermingling Power Relations in The Slave, Dutchman and Mahabhoj

Saheb Kaur

Comparative Indian Literature, University of Delhi

Abstract: This paper shall investigate how the body politic elaborates in the texts, as a site of lineage and identity, which is eventually dismantled as a site of socio-political and legal victimization. The purpose to choose Leroi Jones' *The Slave and Dutchman*, and Mannu Bhandari's *Mahabhoj* is to mark the latter as a continuation of the former where the black body's subjugation and subsequent killing can be traced in Saroha Village in the body of the murdered protagonist, Bisu. The plots of the plays 'Dutchman', and 'The Slave' negotiate with the narrative of *Mahabhoj*, which not only makes them relative cross-culturally and gives a site of east-west relations, but also conveniently unfolds the functioning of power as unspecific to locale and omnipresent.

Keywords: Power relations, Legitimized oppressions, Justice, Identity.

Introduction

Power relations are embedded in the socio-political and judicial systems which endow the exercising of power with the limitation of being less accommodating and thereby more confining. This paper, hence, shall elucidate a critical inquiry into the functioning of power relations vis-à-vis three dramatic texts, *Dutchman* and *The Slave* (2001) by Leroi Jones and *Mahabhoj* (1983) by Mannu Bhandari. It shall deal with the comparative study of how power reverberates, unmasking an imperative urge for justice and prerogatives examining the legitimized oppressions in the name of slavery, caste discrimination and political gain. The aim is to draw attention

towards the anti-segregation resistance during the 1960s and 1970s in America and caste suppression and politics of Saroha village in Uttar Pradesh. They may differ contextually but run simultaneously as a response to the devouring legal oppressions which blatantly reveal that the exercise of power, its derivation and maintenance – are state pogromed.

Leroi Jones' plays *Dutchman* and *The Slave* emerge as acts of reprobation. They not only portend a radical shift in the traditional idea of theatre but also examine the claim of Black Identity¹ as a reaction to the practice of Slavery, a confinement of law. The focus of this paper is to elucidate Jones' Black Revolutionary Theatre as theatre of resistance that ensured resilience of Blackness² as revolution. It will explore the ambiguities of relation(s) between the white and the black and how the concept of "body" responded to the legal system which legitimized oppression in the name of Slavery by the white, which demoted equality and justice.

In *Dutchman*, Jones through Clay Williams conveys how for years black rage has either been repressed or understood as music of Bessie Smith or Charlie Parker: "A whole of people of neurotics, struggling to keep from being sane" (Jones 2001, 35). These words highlight the pervasiveness in Jones' work. Although a Negro's suppressed hatred must result in neurosis and only his expression of that murderous rage is testimony of black's sanity, this state of being, is what Clay was unable to achieve since he hid his "pumping black heart" beneath his three-buttoned suit. It shows that this spiritual killing of him became a reason for his actual state- pogrommed murder testified in Lula's action of scribbling a note in her diary. The

¹ Black Identity deals with the coming together of blacks claiming their existence as equals against the inhuman treatment given to them by the white in the form of Slavery that was legally valid.

² Blackness refers to the state of being black skinned which was considered as unnatural, inferior and worth taming by the white skinned. In religious terms it was the colour of evil. It also refers to a plural, a collective of same skinned vis-à-vis a black individual.

continuity and routine of this state- sponsored victimization is visible in cyclic structure of the play where Lula begins to greet more black young men the same way she greeted Clay. Throughout the play, Lula consistently taunts him about his middle-class comportment hinting that he is not a true black man. James Hatch mentions in *Theatre in Historically Black colleges* (1999), that Lula efforts to make Clay into “the stereotypical Black figure whom whites create and demand” (152). Clay’s enthrallment in white, middle-class view of the world is clearly seen in when he intones:

If Bessie Smith had killed some white people she wouldn’t have needed that music...no grunts...just two and two are four. Money. Power. Luxury. (Jones 2001, 35)

This archetype that Lula needs Clay to satiate her white psychology before she can sexually satisfy herself is the “white –myth of Black Male sexuality”- which means sexual superiority of the black male (Hatch 1999, 152). Clay, on the contrary, uses this myth to exhibit the precise and intentional distortion of African Americans. Jones’ attack on Negro- middle class mediocrity was a truism for him, which made him believe that this could deplete man’s vitality and sexuality. Hence, the adherence to the distinction of mind and body becomes essential because it enables one’s body to disconnect from the worldly pleasures. Henry D. Miller in *Theorizing Black Theatre: Art Versus Protest in Civil Writings*, remarks,

One must adhere to the notion of the division of mind and body, another western, male, biblically inspired assumption closely related to the notion of Woman as temptress. If men can live in their minds, so to speak, they will no longer be prisoners of their body’s seemingly relentless desire for women (208).

Jones’ symbolism in the *Dutchman* and the middle-class attitude of Clay suggest an alternative view which certainly cannot be reduced to issues and conflicts of the black and the white. The characters of Clay and Lula appear

to emerge as Adam and Eve. In the very first scene, Lula devours apples and shares with Clay too. This scene seems to posit her as a temptress which has been designated by Western male ideology which Jones seems to critique. Therefore, the incessant attempts by her to sculpt Clay as per her will, questions her own unconscious submission to the white male ideology conditioned by religion, which nurtures her as a victim who tries to exercise her power on a black man, black being considered inferior than white. It appears that Lula could overpower and overrule only black males since she is not conditioned to exercise her power over white men. The sexual strife between both the characters, on the other hand, can also be seen as sexual inadequacy vis-à-vis Lula's effort to relieve Clay of his white-inspired, middle-class presumptions, which disable him to put forth his inordinate sexual behavior. Hence, his monologue can also be inferred as a response, a heterosexual rage of a male whose sexual adroitness has been challenged by a woman.

In Jones' *The Slave*, Walker Vessels, on the contrary, brings out his revolutionary instincts against his oppressive past depicted by his white ex-wife, Grace and the liberal, intellectual Easley. Walker, as the play begins seems to emerge as a black revolutionary hero but as the play unfolds, one realizes that such countenance of Walker never really materializes. Instead, Jones through this potentiality in Walker to become a hero emphasizes on a different understanding of revolution, a complex perspective that initiates conflict between Walker's public and private being and hence unveils the moral ambiguity clearly visible in the argument.

GRACE: Walker, I was, am white. What do you think was going through my mind every time you were at some rally or meeting whose sole purpose was to bring about the destruction of white people?

WALKER: Oh, goddamn it, Grace, are you so stupid? You were my wife...I loved you. I was not supposed to say things I felt. I

was crying out against three hundred years of oppression; not against individuals (Jones 2001, 72).

This indeed uncovers Jones' dilution and qualification of the revolutionary in the play. With characters of Grace, Easley and the children and by showing their apprehensions and hopes Jones make them the victims of revolutionary fury. By doing this he endorses the humanizing of the enemy and forfeits sympathy for Walker Vessels. Initially, the exposition of private lives and conflicts of the characters in the play appears to overshadow political events and racial confrontation but eventually, the naturalistic depiction remains not of so much significance as the characters that portray larger political abstractions with human problems of parenting, sexual inadequacy and marriage.

The intricacies of conflicting interiors and exteriors of characters is strongly conveyed by Easley, regarded as an embodiment of decadence of white culture, specifically his liberal approach to life. He is described as "broad...with thinning hair" (41). His childless marriage and acceptance of Walker's aggression can be equated with his liberal idealistic ways which lack conviction, arraignment and substantial action. Despite all this, his intellectual bent seems to relieve Walker Vessels of his conflicts and the notion of revolution in the play. He says,

A flashy doggerel for inducing all those unfortunate troops of yours to spill their blood in your behalf. But I guess that's something! Ritual drama, we used to call in the university, the poetry of ritual drama (55).

This remark of Easley blatantly reveals how far Walker is from accepting this idea and shows the ambiguity of the revolutionary role he carries within. When he asks Walker if the new order (better from the old one) "will...change the essential function of the world?" one is reminded of Walker's words that the revolution "will only change, ha, the complexion of

tyranny.” (56) This poignantly shows power relations thrust itself and their implementation in the oppressed and the oppressor. Instead of juxtaposing power with rationality it constitutes of reversing power relations. Michel Foucault in *The Subject and Power* (2000) mentions,

...the main objective of these struggles is to attack not so much such –or-such institution of power, or group, or elite, or class but, rather, a technique, a form of power... [That] attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others must recognize in him. It’s a form of power that makes individuals subjects (19).

This is what is perhaps denoted in Walker’s revelation when he confesses that rather than pursuing revolution against white society, he would opt for their intellectual company. This starkly comments on the nature of revolution which aims at abolishing a certain kind of slavery but, simultaneously, manifests another. This justifies the very title of the play, leaving the reader with a question- who is a slave?

Most significantly, it is the structure of the play which concerns Jones’ engagement with the revolution and play’s insufficiency as revolutionary drama. The beginning of the prologue shifts from obedience of a slave to mastery, from vacillating speeches at the beginning to clipped determination at the conclusion, from service to the “old blues people...hard as nails, and taking no shit from nobody” and despite this construction of strength and will, the speaker collapses into his former tiredness, uncertain actions and constant dilemma (Jones 2001, 44). The play commences with the appearance of an “old-field slave” who becomes the prologue for the subsequent action. Here, Jones has applied the metaphor of Negro subservience and oppression, the accepted planting of white imagination, which transforms this stereotypical white imagination into somebody more complex and unexpected. As the prologue details,

Whatever I am or seem...to you, then let that rest. But figure still, that you might not be right...You might be lying ...to save yourself (44).

The idea of deceit becomes important which not only manifests the hypocrisy that creates the roles for the black to play, but also formulates self-deceit which disable men to realize that “we are liars, and we are murderers” (41). The inclusion of the word “we” articulates the universal involvement in this omnipresent motif “that passes as whatever thing we feel is too righteous to question, too deeply felt to deny” (44). This highlights the continuity of pattern of suppression and such resistances which universalize the concept of power, its execution, the resistance against it, fall of a power and substituting it with another. Hence, at the end of the play Walker might appear to be victorious when Grace, Easley and his Mulatto daughters have died but as he exits to join the revolution, he wobbles and is accompanied by the sound of a crying child. The anticipation in the prologue is realized that the slave is awakened by the faint cries in the figure of the old man that appears at the commencement of the play. As Walker leaves he becomes the slave of his own revolutionary passions that thrive on destruction. By killing his former masters, Walker Vessels has bartered physical bondage with moral thralldom; even if he has gained his intention as material, he becomes an oppressor, if only, as Jones wanted, it is now his turn.

Jones mentions in the Myth of Negro Literature that the most important purpose of this kind of theatre is to bring into action the opinion(s) of the black as victims and annalists residing in a “no-man’s land, a black country almost invisible to White America” (20-21). Leroi Jones’ new theatre aims to attain a new order of existence, a social change reflected by adopting a different dramatic language which consciously attempts to disturb the spectators. It aims to incite them to reciprocate and transform. The plays illustrate the lifestyle and oppressions on the Black and serve the audience the radical possibilities of reversing the existing order. To implement such changes theatrically the plays’ script and spectacle must invest in imagining

and imaging blacks in new roles, by incorporating essential music and representing the special characteristics of the black being, by deriding the punctilious structures of power and the traditional semblance of this theatre, these plays forge change by being unlike the earlier proscenium. In essence, the pivotal instrument in Jones' revolutionary drama was Violence. Jones in his introduction to Four Black Revolutionary plays, he warns, "Unless you are killing white people, killing the shit they've built, don't read this shit, you won't like it, and it sure won't like you" (Baraka1998, vii). Jones' intent to preach Blackness by the shared communal participation of actors and spectators builds the communal consciousness of this drama. This critiques the alienation in Western theatre to be an ensemble of a dejected civilization unlike human condition. The Black Revolutionary Drama hence aims to create propaganda through depicting violence on stage in order to claim and re-claim one's identity.

The oppression that one witnesses in both the plays by Leroi Jones is oppression to the extent of killing the body which stresses that even the flesh of the oppressed does not belong to him/her. The idea of Black Nationalism³ and Black Identity portrayed correspond to the Black body as a subject and site of victimization which wills to transform into a site of confrontation and subsequently create a performed cultural discourse. In Dutchman, Lula says, "Open the door and throw his body out" (37). This Black body as means of persistent use and abuse has been constructed, conditioned and legitimized by the law. The question then occurs, how far the law is justified, how are the legal systems then capable of investing faith in? As the black body is attacked by the judicial use of power, the White body, in Jones' plays, is attacked by violence as a method to revenge. One starkly observes the inability to restore a social order but hardships and killings to gain power. In

³ "...nationality formation w(h)ere African-Americans experiencing a process of self-emancipation, involving varying degrees of self-definition, collective transformation, and mass mobilization." From Komozi Woodard's *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones & Black Power Politics)*, pp. 114.

The Slave, Walker vessels encroaches and occupies the house of Easley and Grace, this incident is symbolic of the house turning into a panopticon for a moment where initially Grace and Easley cannot locate his presence but are visible to Walker. It is only when he makes himself visible; they are able to position him. The stage directions mention,

He moves to get the drink and spots Walker leaning back against the wall, half smiling... but still holding the gun, stomach high, and very stiffly (Jones 47).

The history of Black Theatre acknowledges that most of the plays during Jones' time had symbolic, repetitive spaces: the street that distinguishes black ghetto from affluent white culture, the prison that is the symbol of white tyranny etc. but here, in Jones' *The Slave*, one locates the inversion of such blatant oppressive spaces by making the house of whites a cage for their own bodies. Therefore, the house becomes a chamber of insult, cruelty, retaliation and destruction. Since body is considered as an adobe of culture, tradition and legacy therefore destroying the same would result in lessening the density and existence of a race as visible in the dead bodies of Clay, Grace, Easley and Mulatto daughters.

The idea of performance as resistance is a part of Black performativity but the notion of embodied resistance appries us to the lived experiences of the body just as Clay's repression in the "hidden pumping heart". This reveals how these experiences formulate their responses to the effects of power and attempt to reshape their social and cultural contexts. Klein in *Waiting for Performance* (2000) observes that "performance has been the medium of choice for artists who wish to stage social interventions" (77). The significant locus of such events is their willingness to risk their own bodies to do so. What renders body art politically significant is that "every form of violence can be demonstrated in the body, factually and symbolically, with great immediacy" (78). Hence, body art proposes the

body as an artistic tool to trace various motifs of power in play and performance.

Jones' through *Dutchman*, *The Slave* and *Black Revolutionary Drama* emphasizes radical alterations in the pre-conceived notion of theatre by communicating the social, political, legal oppressions which inculcate the uncathartic empathy that instigates to act. Also, that who offers the domination also, simultaneously, contributes in shaping resistance as collective consciousness, a social body that Foucault calls "massive and universalizing form" in *The Subject and Power*, which manifests its struggles in the seizure and substitution of the ruling power (348).

Mannu Bhandari's *Mahabhoj* boldly elaborates exposition of the contemporary Indian political scene that betrays public trust for vested interests and private ends. The play opens with the death of Bisesar, a villager of Sroha / Saroha fighting for the minimum wages for the Dalit workers and resisting against the loss of Dalit basti that was set fire on. The play begins with the Narrator saying,

Unclaimed bodies are scavenged upon...but Bisesar is not unclaimed.

He has a mother and a father, although poor, they exist...Even swirling of a leaf in Siroha/ Saroha is as significant as an event today. The elections shall take place just after a month... That's why even a smallest incident is analysed vis-à-vis the Vidhan Sabha Seat. Otherwise, who Bisu and what of his death! (Bhandari 15-18)

The scavenging of bodies that the narrator describes corresponds to the idea of *Mahabhoj*, the great feast. It conforms to the idea of politicians (of the ruling and the opposition) feeding upon the death of Bisesar to carve out vote and claim the only Vidhan Sabha seat. This stands analogous to the death rites performed for a human body where the Brahmin priests feast upon the

tragedy. One needs to know that death of an unknown village youth in itself is an insignificant event. But with an important by-election around the corner, the feasting becomes significant where opposing political parties, like vultures, seize upon the unfortunate event to extract political capital out of it. This provides sharp insights into the exercise of power and patronage.

Saroha/ Siroha and its predatory politicians represent a pan-Indian context. Da Sahib, the reigning chief minister of the state, puts up his trusted servant Lakhan, for the election. Da Sahib is the most interesting participant in the feast: he swears by Mahatma Gandhi, the Gita, democracy, freedom of the press, and so on. He, therefore, from the very beginning of the play emerges as a sovereign and democratic figure. His realities gradually get unveiled when he asks the police personnel Sinha to make Bisesar's death a case of suicide and the very next day, in his rally, he offers reparation to the affected Dalit families of the Dalit basti, by Bisesar's father. It was with this specific gimmick he could gain votes from the community; curb the resistances by the people like Binda and Mahesh who claimed Bisesar's death to be a planned strategic murder. Hence, he could maintain his power and position. The densely dark side of Da Sahib is depicted when he financially nurtures the newspaper "Mashaal" (Torch) that changes its stance overnight. Thus, the significance of the institutions like Media is critiqued. It highlights the fact that a crucial part of the state running mechanisms, institutions, which otherwise appear to be neutral, are built in order to ensure the preservation and defense of state. Even when the resistance by Binda and Mahesh did not stop, that resulted in the compilation of a report on Bisesar's death, Da Sahib transferred Superintendent of Police, Saxena who had compiled the report. Also, the most prominent consequence was Binda's arrest; hauled up on a charge of murdering Bisesar. The slick chief minister also takes good care of Joravar, the upper-caste landlord of the area, making him withdraw his nomination for the election by gently but firmly waving an ominous police report in his face. Hence, power always sustains itself on the actions of resistance of others. The potential government of Da Sahib does not only refer to the management of state, rather it is constructed in a way to direct

and condition. The idea of governance therefore is not only legitimized by the creation of political subjects- in this case the villagers- but also rests on the resilience of those who recognize oppression and thus retaliate. Michel Foucault in *The Subject and Power* writes,

Power is exercised only over free subjects...by this we mean that the individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several kinds of conduct...are available. (Foucault 342)

Characters like Binda and Mahesh therefore emerge as free subjects who do not normalize the suppressive techniques and functioning of Da sahib through their struggle against the state sponsored institutions.

Leroi Jones' plays *Dutchman* and *The Slave* and Mannu Bhandari's *Mahabhoj* delve into the equations of power in different contexts, yet what binds them are the functions of power-execution and maintenance. The mutually shared component is violence inflicted on bodies and their subsequent death. These bodies are sites of victimization and power maintenance, and killing those stands for diminishing the existence of the resisting other. *Mahabhoj* opens with the mourning over the dead body of Bisesar and Leroi Jones' plays end with the dead bodies. It appears that the body mutilation in Jones' plays thrives on the living bodies, as sites of violence. After their death this victimization and violence is manifested and visualized in Bisesar's body which is scavenged upon by the politically vested interests. Therefore, it investigates how the body politics elaborates in the texts, as a site of lineage and identity, which is eventually dismantled as a site of socio-political and legal victimization. Thus, Mannu Bhandari's *Mahabhoj* can be seen as a continuation of Leroi Jones' *The Slave* and *Dutchman* where the black body's subjugation and subsequent killing can be traced in Saroha / Siroha Village in the body of the murdered protagonist, Bisu. The plots of the plays *Dutchman*, and *The Slave* negotiate with the narrative of *Mahabhoj*, which not only makes them relative cross-culturally

and gives a site of east-west relations, but also conveniently unfolds the functioning of power as unspecific to locale and omnipresent.

References

- Baraka, Amiri. 1998. *Four Black Revolutionary Plays*. New York: Marion Boyars.
- Bhandari, Manu. 1983. *Mahabhoj: Natya Rupantar*. New Delhi: Radhakrishan.
- Foucault, Michel. 2000. "The Subject and Power". In James D. Faubion, ed. *Power*. New York: The New Press.
- Hatch, James V. 1999. "Theatre in Historically Black Colleges". In Annemarie Bean, ed. *A Sourcebook of African- American Performance*. New York: Routledge.
- Jones, Leroi. 2001. *Dutchman and The Slave*. New York: Harper Collins.
- April 20, 1963. "The Myth of a Negro Literature". *Saturday Review* 20-21.
- Klein, J. 2000. "Waiting for Performance". *PAJ* 66: 78–87.
- Miller D., Henry. 2011. *Theorizing Black Theatre: Art Versus Protest in Critical Writings, 1898-1965*. North Carolina: McFarland & Company.
- Woodard, Komozi. 1999. *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) & Black Power Politics*. North Carolina: The University of North Carolina press.