

## On Violence, Race and the Defiance of Traditional Gender Roles in Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman* by Arnab Chatterjee

### *Abstract*

The construction of gender and the resultant 'roles' that it plays or is meant to play in a semiotic system has garnered much challenging vistas of critical investigation in feminist and queer theory. Following Butler's famous remark that "gender is performative" and does not have a pristine, transcendental identity of its own, much of the debate lies on the 'porous' areas that outline gender. Thus to be aggressive is masculine and docility being a hallmark of feminine charm is no longer tenable. Following this cue, this proposed paper would try to critically investigate this act of "straddling" across gender and sexual 'norms' from the vantage point of Amiri Baraka's acclaimed play *Dutchman* (1964). Racially oriented, and having a somewhat Pinteresque setting, the play shows two characters, the white female seductress Lula and the black victim Clay engaged in a game of power and the gradual effort to wrest a territory of their own, that reverses the traditional notions of gender performativity. Lula would go to any limits to be as aggressive as she can be, to the point of being a white murderess as the play shows, while Clay would initially be more concerned saving his petite, middle class bourgeoisie image and would resort to violence on a mere verbal level only in the last resort. The play is interesting not only because it portrays race relations in the then racist America, but also because the characters while beleaguered by questions of race and ethnicity perform their gender specific 'roles' in a way that may be of interest to feminists and queer theorists who would increasingly refuse to assign a defining 'center' to these terms.

**Keywords:** Gender, Performative, Behavioral, Role.

### **On Violence, Race and the Defiance of Traditional Gender Roles in Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman* by Arnab Chatterjee**

Questions of race and ethnicity have occupied Afro-American writers for a considerable period of time. This abiding interest has been prompted by an unjust society that is based on the color line: the one that sees the dominant, white elitist group be privileged over the surrounding but subcultural, black society mostly committed to the ghettos. Afro-Americans constitute just twelve per cent of the US population, but this group has been extremely vocal as regards the denial of the basic necessities of life that has mostly been appropriated by the white population of America. The Civil Rights Movement, needless to say, was the one that fought for equal rights in day-to-day life. The black population has been routinely looked down by the surrounding, monolithic white culture as a "subculture", the one that in Gelder's words, may come to be seen as "non-conformist and non-normative, different and dissenting..." (3). Whatever be the ways in which the color factor has been used to deprive Afro-Americans, the ways in which both the questions of gender and race coupled with notions of ethnicity have intersected in various ways has gained attention in academic circles of late (Spivak 2203; "Bell Hooks" 2475).

**Amiri Baraka and his plays:** The questions of racial conflict and a rage emerging from the status quo is the stock theme of the plays and the poems of (Imamu) Amiri Baraka, erstwhile LeRoi Jones (1934-2014). Baraka started his career as a poet in the Beat tradition but became soon disenchanted with its certain tendencies and moved to Greenwich Village where he founded the Black Arts Repertory that featured plays written by the newly emerging African-American playwrights. Baraka's celebrated play *Dutchman* (1964) that won him an Obie award explores that part of the Afro-American psyche that finally emerges from the horrors of the infamous Middle Passage and has drunk in full the anger resulting from the unjust treatment of the minority blacks at the hands of the whites. The play may be read as a companion piece to *The Slave* that was also written in the same year. *Dutchman* deals in a somewhat pinteresque fashion employing semi-absurdist

techniques concentrating on the failure of meaningful communication as a 'unit' of analysis the initial amorous dialogues and the resultant conflicts between a young black intellectual called Clay and a white female seductress Lula in an underground subway station that does not see any change in the scene. The play is interesting not only because it portrays the then racial conflict between the blacks and whites in the sixties but because characters contradict traditional gender roles that they are otherwise meant to play in a particular situation that defines what is traditionally considered "masculine" and what is thought to constitute "femininity."

**Dutchman the play and issues at work:** The play opens in a typical pinteresque setting, in an enclosed space. The setting is a subway station in "the flying underbelly" (3) of a city, a subway station that shows two principal characters, Clay, a black negro in his twenties, and Lula, a white femme fatale in her thirties. The train comes to a halt and Lula enters the car with a load of books and stationary. She is wearing "bright, skimpy summer clothes and sandals" (5). In the Shavian fashion, the gender roles seem to have reversed: it is the woman who has become the hunter and not the man. But this time, the 'intention' of the hunter is quite different: it is not to propagate a higher species but to eliminate the hunted from the general scheme of things. Commenting on the playing of traditional genders roles prescribed by a culture, the comments of William Ickes are useful:

*When men and women play out their own behavior the respective masculine and feminine gender roles that have traditionally been prescribed by their culture, do their close relationships benefit or suffer? (...) I propose that, in this era of changing gender role expectations, both types of effects occur. When men and women first meet, their enactment of traditional gender roles may benefit their relationship by promoting mutual attraction and facilitating the mutual perception that the other is a potentially desirable mate. Ironically, however, the seeds of these relationships may contain their own poison. From even their earliest encounters, the partners' respective enactment of their traditional gender roles may begin to undermine their*

*relationship by fostering the kind of female/male  
miscommunication that has recently been documented...  
(72; emphasis added)*

Clay is much of a Baraka figure himself in his youthful days, still unsure about his place and mission in the black community. On the other end of the spectrum, Lula is all too conscious about her desired end: as we shall see at the end of this play, Clay is brutally murdered and thrown off the train. But the manner in which she achieves this aim may be of interest to us: this is where notions of race intersect with gender, especially gender performativity. In the traditional manner, to be coy is the hall mark of femininity and to be aggressive is to be a man. As it has been rightly pointed out, "If and when scientists turn to the study of women, they typically look for ways in which women *conform to or diverge* from patterns found in the study of men" (Belenky et al. 6; emphases added). Butler reminds us time and again that to be a male or a female has to do with performance, i.e. how characters typically bring themselves into action in a signifying system and that gender does not have any pristine, transcendental authority of its own, but is a "pre-established condition that one repeatedly enacts" (Abrams 93). The entire play shows this straddling between gender that gets thoroughly intertwined with issues of race and ethnicity.

**Dialogue as a unit of analysis:** Lula and Clay engage in light-hearted discussion in the beginning. When she remarks that Warren Enright must be a tall, skinny guy whom Clay is going to meet in the evening, the latter is much amazed by this remark for he was indeed on his way to his friend's house at that point of time. While Clay initially remains uninterested in her advances, Lula herself initiates that step:

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LULA. [putting her hand on Clay's closest knee, drawing it from the knee up to the thigh's hinge, then removing it, watching his face very closely, and continuing to laugh, perhaps more gently than before]

Dull, dull, dull. I bet you think I'm exciting.

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CLAY. You're O.K.

LULA. *Am I exciting you now?*

CLAY. *Right. That's not what's supposed to happen?*

LULA. How do I know?

[She returns her hand, without moving it, then takes it away and plunges it in her bag to draw out an apple].

You want this?

CLAY. Sure.

LULA.

[She gets one out of the bag for herself]

Eating apples together is always the first step. Or walking up uninhabited Seventh Avenue in the twenties on weekends.

[Bites and giggles, glancing at Clay and speaking in loose singsong]

Can you get involved... boy! Get us involved. Um-huh.

[Mock seriousness]

Would you like to get involved with me, Mister Man? (10-11; emphases added)

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As this short passage from Scene 1 of the play points out, Lula has already crossed that traditional, sacral feminine line that demands a woman to be coy, submissive and to be the one who is to be courted and not who shall do the reverse. However, what Lula does in the play has a racial undertone: she flippantly tests Clay's mental endurance and gives him false hopes of courtship only to kill him in the end. Why she exactly does so is not clear from the play that mixes topical racial issues and semi-absurdity in a dexterous manner. Perhaps Baraka wants the younger black generation to understand that a failure to stick to black ethos and even a mere desire to be appropriated into the white order will mean nothing but extinction. It is somewhat clear that Lula is on a mission to eliminate blacks, presumably under the orders from a secret society much in the lines of the Klan. At the end of the play, yet another black man of roughly the same age as Clay enters and we can well anticipate the game to begin anew.

Judith Butler's deft remarks in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993) may now help us elaborate the argument of this essay further:

*The concept of "sex" is itself troubled terrain, formed through a series of contestations over what ought to be decisive criterion for distinguishing between the two sexes; the concept of sex has a history that is covered over by the figure of the site or surface of inscription. (5)*

Lula engages in a verbal game that brings both this "troubled terrain" as well as the racial quotient to the fore. When it comes to guessing the name of Clay, Lula engages in a dual game of flirtation and racial stereotyping that slowly seeks to establish a dominance on the cognitive functioning of our male character:

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LULA. I bet your name is ... something like... uh, Gerald or Walter. Huh?

CLAY. God, no.

LULA. Lloyd, Norman? *One of those hopeless colored names creeping out of New Jersey. Leonard? Gag...*

CLAY. Like Warren?

LULA. Definitely. Just exactly like Warren. Or Everett. (15; emphases added)

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As it is clear by now, Lula tries to gain mental control over Clay, and the latter slowly starts to realize this in Scene 2, when Lula, with a plan to execute, starts commenting on African-American history and on the emergence of blues in particular. While Lula tells him that plantations in the South had wires around them, Clay contradicts the same. The dialogue is interesting for Lula slowly crosses all norms of verbal decency and also her erstwhile, pretentious feminine charm at the same time, with Clay using verbal abuse only in the last resort:

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LULA: Don't they have wire around plantations?

CLAY. You must be Jewish. All you can think about is wire. Plantations didn't have any wire. Plantations were big open whitewashed places like heaven, and everybody on `em was grooved to be there. Just strummin' and hummin' all day.

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LULA. Yes, yes.

CLAY. And that's how the blues was born.

LULA. Yes, yes. And that's how the blues was born.

[Begins to make up a song that quickly becomes quickly hysterical. As she sings, she rises from her seat, still throwing things out of her bag into the aisle, beginning a rhythmical shudder and twistlike wiggle, which she continues up and down the aisle, bumping into many of the standing people and tripping over the feet of those sitting. Each time she runs into a person she lets out very vicious piece of profanity, wiggling and stepping all the time]

And that's how the blues was born. Yes. Yes. Son of a bitch, get out of the way. Yes. Quack. Yes. Yes. And that's how the blues was born. Ten little niggers sitting on a limb, but none of them ever looked like him.

[Points to CLAY, returns toward the seat, with her hands extended for him to rise and dance with her]

And that's how blues was born. Yes. Come on, Clay. Let's do the nasty. Rub bellies. Rub bellies.

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CLAY. Lula! Sit down, now. Be cool.

LULA.

[Mocking him, in wild dance]

Be cool. Be cool. That's all you know...shaking that wildroot cream-oil on your knotty head, jackets buttoning up to your chin, so full of white man's words. Christ. God. Get up and scream at these people. Like scream meaningless shit in these hopeless faces. (30-31)

As it can be understood from a somewhat long dialogue between Clay and Lula, the former is still not in the mood to lose his gentleman-like composure and readily allows Lula to discover things for herself, while Lula slowly loses her erstwhile composure and advances towards her nefarious aims. However Clay's patience gives in and he resorts to verbal abuse only when he understands that Lula has overstepped her conventionally understood norms of decency and gender role:

*[Through his teeth]*

*I'll rip your lousy breasts off. Let me be who I feel like being.  
Uncle Tom. Thomas. Whoever. It's none of your business.  
You don't know anything except what's there for you to see.  
An act. Lies. Device. Not the pure heart, the pumping black  
heart. (34)*

**Conclusion:** Towards the end of the play, Clay finally declares that he could not establish a rapport with Lula and decides to get off at the next station. It is just then that Lula takes out a knife and stabs him and orders the other co-passengers to get out at the next station. In no time, yet another black of roughly the same age as Clay alights and there are ample clues to provide us with a conclusion that this game of seduction and murder would go on again. In an interview with Charlie Reilly, Baraka had admitted the tendency of certain critics to associate the apple-eating Lula with Eve (256). What seems to be clear is that perhaps Baraka wants us to be aware of Lula's inherently 'fallen' status for being a white and of Clay committing this mistake of initially associating himself with white values for which he has to pay dearly later on.

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