James Baldwin and the Doctrine of the Black Revolutionary Theatre: An analysis of Blues for Mister Charlie

Amirikpa Oyigbenu
Department of Theatre Arts, Kogi State University, PMB 1008, Anyigba, Nigeria.
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ABSTRACT

The relationship between black Africa and Euro-America has been defined and dictated by distinctions in race differentials. From the initial contact between these two distinctly dichotomous races, there ensued what could best be ascribed as ‘never-ending war’ of the world’s two large races with the white race claiming superiority over the black people of Africa and blacks in the Diaspora. This article investigates the interloping issues of racism, identity and fundamental human rights of the African-American within the context of the doctrine of the Black Revolutionary Theatre, using James Baldwin’s Blues for Mister Charlie as a working paradigm. The paper concludes that despite the gains that have been attained in improved race relationship between blacks and whites in the United States, a lot still need to be done. Since racism and racial prejudice cannot be completely eradicated, the imperative is for compromise and accommodation, as well as mutual respect between blacks and whites regardless of distinctions of colour.

Keywords: Doctrine, black, revolutionary, theatre, racism and racial discrimination.

E-mail: dramaoyigbenu_232@yahoo.co.uk. Tel: +234803 958 3175, +234808 585 7976.

INTRODUCTION

While the literature of white America is replete with stories and themes of invincibility, heroism and the conquest of the New World’s indigenous peoples, the literature of black America on the other hand is suffused with the pains, agonies and attendant bitterness of long centuries of slavery, racial discrimination, subjugation, the deliberate deprivation of natural human rights and the endless struggle for freedom through the construction of acceptable and befitting black ethnic identity. Mainstream American psychologists, scientists, anthropologists and even statesmen propagate the doctrine of innate black mental inferiority as biologically constructed. This doctrine gained currency and acceptability as empirical truisms among the white mainstream intellectual community in the domain of academic discourse of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This assumption, therefore, tended to foreclose and overshadow African-American achievements in the areas of scientific and technological innovations, cultural and literary contributions to America and the world civilization.

Historical background

Among the many purveyors of the doctrine of white mental and scientific superiority over black people was Count Joseph Albert de Gobineau, who in his multivolume Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races propounded the theory that, “the white race was innately superior to the darker ones”, while the white Aryan race are the “summit of civilization” [Vincent P. Franklin (1980), in Reginald L. Jones, ed., 202]. Thomas Jefferson

The unforeseen arrival of the ambitious Europeans in the mid-fifteenth century represented the first sustained contact between black Africans and a larger global community via the oceans, and this initial communication would set the foundation for centuries of unimaginable suffering (Spellman, 2002:54).
also corroborated this superiority thesis in an argument he proffered in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, that blacks were inferior to whites in both mind and body. This deep-seated mindset caused Jefferson to suggest the repatriation of African slaves back to Africa because, according to him, “when freed, the black slave is to be removed beyond the reach of mixture”, so that he does not stain the blood of his master (Watson, 1979:52). Having achieved this plan of repatriation, they should be replaced with hired labour from Britain.

Charles Darwin’s *Origins of Species* (1859) and the theory of social Darwinism provided the much-needed justification for the enslavement of Africans as a result of their innate inadaptability to the environment. Arousing from this assumption, Anglo-Saxon Protestants reasoned that the white race was created to win in the struggle for survival while other groups were doomed to perish. Accordingly, they also believed that, the Anglo-Saxon race was divinely positioned to win in “the struggle for survival, while other groups were obviously doomed to extinction” (Watson, 1979:203). Eurocentric advocates of social Darwinism upheld the spurious ideology that “Africans were ‘natural’ slaves” (Berghahn, 1979:12), therefore, enslaving them was “a blessing... because through its agency he was brought into contact with Christianity” (Uya, 1992:23). Against this backdrop, therefore, advocates of the thesis of racial superiority devised representational symbols and mysticism which greatly affected and directed Western cultural tradition and philosophy in relation to minority cultures and societies.

Because Count de Gorbineau appeared to be the most prominent advocate of white superiority and black inferiority, Peter Rigby quotes Jean-Paul Sartre as referring to Gorbineau as “the father of racism in its pseudo-scientific and modern forms...” (Rigby, 1996). Rigby also asserts that it was Gorbineau who divided the human race into “three great races...black, yellow and white” [28], with white at the top, yellow in-between and black at the bottom.

Furthermore, the Rev. Springfellow’s contribution to the debate provides a spiritual argument to support the claim of white superiority over the black race. He was cited as claiming that, “the institution of slavery has received the sanction of the Almighty” (Watson, 1979:52). What this position amounts to is that enslaving Africans was a spiritual duty that was divinely ordained; a thinking which is in consonance with the Protestant assumptions that slavery was a civilizing mission that was intended to convert black ‘heathens’ to Christianity. From spiritual justification to statute law, the colony of Maryland legislation of 1671 declared that converting slaves to Christianity did not grant them freedom from slavery. A *fait accompli* could then be said to have been provided for slave masters who then felt that they could import Africans under the guise of converting them to Christianity; thereby justifying the act of holding them in slavery.

Again, Dr. Cartwright, a renowned scientist and scholar had declared that, “The species of genus homo are not a unity but a plurality...[in which] the black species was so unlike the others”, therefore, “the danger in questioning slavery lies in the ignorance of the scripture, and of the Natural History of the negro” (Watson, 1979:52). Unfortunately, however, both Rev. Springfellow and Dr. Cartwright failed to provide relevant evidences from the scripture and the sciences where succinct references are made to the eternal damnation of the Negro to enslavement on account of biological condition of ‘inferiority and intellectual acuity’. Secondly, Dr. Cartwright refers to what he describes as the natural history of the Negro without elaborating what the eternal history of the Negro says about the condition of the Negro. Unarguably, therefore, slavery could be said to evolve from the mindset of European colonists and American planters who were in dire need of overseas colonies and free labour to work on the plantations and the mines fields.

The extent to which racism has been elevated to a state policy manifests in the Old South racial creed which states that, the Negro is inferior and will remain so. Thomas Jefferson, a Southern politician and statesman, a renowned drafter of the American article of Independence as well as the beacon of the Enlightenment Age had declared that, “the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are made inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind” (Watson, 1979:52).

It becomes pertinent from the foregoing assumptions to argue that racism was transplanted to the Americas following the economic and imperial exploits that sought to justify the enslavement of Africans for free labour. Racism was a synthesis of imperialism and capitalism. This position is underscored by Femi Ojo-Adé’s argument that, “The question of colour is inextricably linked to colonialism...and slavery...and culture” (Ojo-Adé, 1989:3), whose flood-gates were opened to European powers by the exploits of Christopher Columbus’ voyage and eventual arrival in the Americas in 1492.

**Conceptual clarification**

The key concepts that require clarification in this essay are: “Doctrine”, “Black”, “Revolutionary” and “Theatre”. By inference also, we deem it expedient to explain “Racism”, or “Racial Discrimination”, because of their centrality to the theme of discourse.

teaching backed by acceptance body of believers or adherents” [589]. Revolutionary is an adjective that relates to revolution or of something that is radical. It can be said to relate to a thing that is tended toward effecting a change from an old order. Black in this regard refers to African Americans who are the descendants of African slaves that were sold and taken to the United States of America for economic purposes. As a result of this historical antecedent, they were/are subjected to all forms of discrimination, segregation, inhumanity and denial of rights accrued to human beings.

Theatre means different things to different people, depending on one’s perception, orientation and cultural background. In a contribution to the definition of Theatre, Brian Crow opines that “it is the place we go to watch, and participate, in a kind of fantasy-life, to be ‘nosey’ about human beings in a special, or organized way” (Crow, 1983). But there is more to theatre than a place where people go to watch performances. Crow further explains that “The performance of a play is clearly an example of that wide range of activities we collectively describe as theatre” (Crow, 1983:2). It is this second point that is being referred to in the context of our discourse; a consideration of theatre both as drama and performance.

We also need a working understanding of Racism or Racial Discrimination for proper appreciation of the issues in discourse. The “International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination”, defines racial discrimination to mean:

...any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, color, descent or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedom in the political, economic, social, cultural or any field of public life (Quinn, 1999:26).

As pragmatic and definite as this universal declaration has been over the years, it has remained paradoxical that the black race has been the major human race that is continually being discriminated against by other races on grounds of difference in skin colour. Slavery, therefore, provided the much-needed justification for the relegation of the black race to sub-human status. As sub-human, black people are considered by the white Caucasian race as cultureless, a people without edified history and civilization. This perceptive ideology tends to portray blacks as inferior beings to whites, thereby possessing traits that manifest slave mentality.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES BALDWIN (1924-1987)

James Baldwin was one of America’s celebrated writers of all time. An insightful and powerful voice of the Civil Rights Movement, Baldwin made no pretensions about his aversion for the hypocrisy of white America in its relationship with black America. He was a prolific poet, novelist, pamphleteer and dramatist who devoted his writings almost exclusively to the racial politics in America. Among his best known publications are Blues for Mister Charlie (play), The Fire Next Time (essays), Go Tell it on the Mountain (fiction), Tell Me How Long The Train’s Been Gone (fiction), The Amen Corner (fiction), Going to Meet the Man (fiction), among many others.

There is no doubt that Baldwin's writings have influenced and altered the social, literary and political consciousness of America; thereby causing America to re-evaluate its racial relationship. He is the winner of several awards that include the 'Partisan Review Fellowship', a 'National Institute of Arts Award' and the prestigious 'Guggenheim Fellowship'.

From a humble beginning in Harlem, Baldwin climbed the rungs of life with difficulty to position himself as an American and international literary icon. A number of his writings reflect the early influences of his family upbringing. His father was a lay minister in the Holy Roller Church in Harlem while his mother worked as a domestic employee on lean pay. About his early childhood, Baldwin said: “My childhood was awful...then; I hadn’t made any clear connection between the fact of color and the fact of my childhood. My childhood was awful in the way many childhoods are. Because we were poor....There were too many of us” (Oliver and Sills, 1971:235).

Frustrated by the rising tide of racism in America, Baldwin went into self-exile in Europe in 1948 and lived mainly in Paris for ten years. While in Paris, he met and courted the friendship of Richard Wright, but the relationship was short-lived because it ended in bitterness (Baldwin, 1971:236). To his credit, it can be asserted that James Baldwin was a self-made man who charted the course of his life fighting for the equality of all races. This position has been emphasized by John Wain (1967) in the 'Introduction' to The Fire Next Time: “He is immersed in the much more subtle problems of relationship: the white American must give the black American the chance to earn a living and hold up his head, but what then? When the two are, at last, acknowledged to be equal, what kind of a nation will they make together?” [xi]

THE DOCTRINE OF BLACK REVOLUTIONARY THEATRE

The Black Revolutionary Theatre was a platform that was created and propagated by Amiri Baraka, formerly LeRoi Jones, for all black American artists as a guiding doctrine upon which to direct their artistic engagements. It is a direct off-shoot of the Black Arts Movement, also a sister
of the Black Power Movement. The Black Revolutionary Theatre, Black Arts Movement and the Black Power Movement were the literary and political components of the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-1950s to 1970s. This theatre is anchored on the idea of Black Nationalism and the need to communalize its practice as a forum for re-orientation and conscientization of the African American people. It also seeks to especially address the socio-cultural reality of African Americans by offering a radical socio-political consciousness against the earlier vilification of black theatre in the preceding decades by the white community. The Black Revolutionary Theatre is therefore an ideological blueprint for all black dramatists, theatre practitioners and writers.

As stated earlier, the founder of this new theatre direction was Amiri Baraka who initiated the Black Arts Theatre concept in Harlem in 1965. Larry Neal has this to say about the new theatre concept:

a theater in the community, and a manifesto for the theater as a total nationalist institution, a reflection in miniature of the entire nation, which was meant above all to be an instrument for the raising of political, ethical, and aesthetic consciousness (Neal, 1987:296).

The theatre provided African American writers the political and aesthetic framework with which to situate and re-examine their relationship with the American mainstream values and culture. Once again, Neal sums it up this way: “It was also a reaction to a racist language and imagery that had made blackness a thing of evil” (Neal, 1987:296). Perhaps this explains Baraka’s aversion, fury and anger when he states that the Black Revolutionary Theatre should expose, attack and accuse the pretensions and hypocrisy of the American mainstream culture. This, indeed, is what Baldwin’s Blues for Mister Charlie seeks to achieve in literary and aesthetic context.

ANALYSIS OF BLUES FOR MISTER CHARLIE

Blues for Mister Charlie is set in America’s South in the early 1960s — a conservative and impervious region that had resisted change for a very long period of time. The play is about Richard Meridian, the son of a black southern minister who went north and returns home and is murdered by Lyle, a white shop owner. This murder precipitates intense race-hate between blacks and whites. Actions in the play take place in two distinct settings; the church and the courthouse. The stage direction states that the church is separated by an aisle, which further “functions as the division between Whitetown and Blacktown” (Baldwin, 1971:244). This set-up creates a visual picture of the policy of non-racial mixing which preceded the Civil Rights Act that desegregated public facilities across the nation. The racial divide is further accentuated by what the playwright describes in the stage direction as: “The action among the blacks takes place on one side of stage, the action among the whites on the opposite side of the stage” (Baldwin, 1971:244).

The play is an enactment of the vicious circle of race-hate, unjust and premeditated murder of black people that was a common-place norm among the white people of the South in the slavery days to the present. This scenario is enacted in the inexplicable murder of Richard Meridian, a black character in the play who returns home after a long sojourn in New York. Baldwin draws extensively from the realistic permutations of racial bigotry that characterized the inhumanity and insensitivity of American whites in the period of slavery to the civil rights days. Blues for Mister Charlie is a fictional re-enactment of the murder case of Emmett Till, the black Mississippi youth that was killed in 1955. In the words of the playwright, the play is dedicated to “the memory of Medger Evers, his widow and his children and to the memory of the dead children of Birmingham” (Baldwin,
By extension, this dedication could allude to all African Americans that were lynched, maimed and brutally murdered by the white establishment and agents of white supremacy in the course of the struggle for social justice, equality, freedom and the attainment of full human rights.

In his authorial declaration, Baldwin states that he is not so much concerned with failure or success of the play, but rather, “I want to shock people; I want to wake them up; I want to make them think; I want to trick them into an experience which I think is important” (Baldwin, 1971:237). This objective is achieved in his artistic technique as a playwright in which he recreates the racial divide that creates a racial chasm between the two black and white races as “Whitetown” and “Blacktown”; with the aisle serving as an un-bridging gulf. The audience response to this enactment is in their varying reactions which are induced by prejudice. Another technique is the effective use of flashback which recreates past events that helps to confront the audiences with vivid happenings in the past for which they are now witnesses to. The consequence is that at the end of the play both racial groups must have left the theatre mumbling, shouting, cursing and threatening vengeance.

Baldwin’s voice echoes on the placards that the black characters in the play carry. Among the placard-carrying characters are Juanita, Pete, Lorenzo and Jimmy, all black militant youths proclaiming their demands for “Freedom Now, We Want The Murderer, One Man, One Vote, etc” (Baldwin, 1971:245). The demands by these black characters are justified within the context of the happenings both in the play and in real life. For example, personal freedom and the right of franchise are the assurances for the attainment of political power as well as inclusive participation in the electoral and political process that are capable of giving voice to people. This realization explains Richard’s predicament about his mother’s death. According to him, “It’s because my Daddy’s got no power that my Mummy’s dead. And he ain’t got no power because he’s black” (Baldwin, 1971:256).

The absence of power for the black people manifests itself in the membership of the jury that is exclusively white. Worse still, the sheriffs, the judges and the top echelon of the police are all white people; people with the responsibility for adjudicating the murder of a black youth. Because of this imbalance in the power equation, die-hard white supremacists like Lyle could afford to commit premeditated murder without contemplating the legal implication of such an act, because he knows that being white he has the support of the white establishment.

Like Ol’ Cap’n Cotchipee in Ossie Davis’s (1971) Purlie Victorious, Lula in LeRoi Jones’s (1964) Dutchman, Easley in The Slave and Sturdyvant in August Wilson’s (1981) Ma Rainey’ Black Bottom, Lyle is impervious to change. This is why in the post no-guilty verdict that was delivered by the predominantly white jury in his favour, he indignantly asks Parnell, a fellow white man who shows sympathy for the blacks:

Lyle: What’s the matter with you? Have you forgotten you [are a] white man? A white man! My Daddy told me to never forget I was a white man! (Baldwin, 1971:311)

Lyle goes on to denounce Parnell for allegedly identifying with black people. He tells Parnell that for supporting black people, he is ashamed of him, sarcastically directing that Parnell should move over to “niggertown”. Paradoxically, the “Whitetown” section of the audience refers to Parnell as, “nigger-lover”, and derides him for turning against his own people. The dilemma that Parnell finds himself is that of rejection by his own white people and suspicion of his sincerity by the Blacktown audience. Blacktown says of him: “I never trusted him! Why? Because he’s white, that’s why!” (Baldwin, 1971:306). Parnell’s closeness to Richard results from his [Parnell’s] testimony to The State that: “His father and I have been friends all our lives” (Baldwin, 1971:306). The interrogation goes on thus:

The State: Close friends?
Parnell: Yes. Very Close.
The State: And what is your relationship to the alleged murderer, Mr. Lyle Britten?
Parnell: We, also, have been friends all our lives.
The State: Close friends?
Parnell: Yes. (Baldwin, 1971:306)

Parnell is representational of integrationist and accommodating white people that the white supremacists condemn for associating and being sympathetic to the cause of black people. His defense of Richard is unparalleled because on one of such defenses, Parnell tells The State that: “After all, he had lived in the North a long time, he wasn’t used to—the way we do things down here” (Baldwin, 1971:307). The State prods further:

The State: He was accustomed to the way things are done in the North — where he learned to carry arms, to take dope, and to couple with white women!
Parnell: I cannot testify to any of that, sir. I can only repeat that he reacted with great intensity to the racial situation in this town, and his effect on the town was, to that extent, unsettling. (Baldwin, 1971:307)

Parnell’s unwavering conviction and commitment to truth is woven throughout his testimony as someone with integrity, conscience and goodwill. Perhaps, this stance helps to vindicate Baldwin’s predilection that he is not concerned with artistic finesse as much as telling the story as realistic and down-to earth as possible. In doing
this, he could be said to have succeeded in exposing and attacking all veneers of hypocrisy of white America and the Christian religion that conspire to keep the African American in bondage.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing discourse, it could be argued that James Baldwin, a fiery voice of the Civil Rights era, has been able to examine and situate his play on the principles of the Black Revolutionary Theatre and the Black Power Movement of the 1960s to 1970s. He has been able to expose, attack and accuse the prevailing reality of the racial situation that precipitated the Civil Rights Movement, which eventually culminated in the Civil Rights and the Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, respectively. His world-view has been shaped by the history of black people, his own personal experiences and the collective experiences of his own people in America. Baldwin could therefore be said to be a product of his own time; a man who chose to deploy the literary tools to fight racial stereotypes and bigotry against his people. The changing face of racism in America today can be attributed to Baldwin’s literary efforts and the struggles that were enunciated by other Civil Rights activists.

Although, much gain has been recorded on the political, economic, social and the educational fields, a lot more still need to be done in the area of true equality and the attainment of rights of all African Americans as citizens without recourse to invoking the stereotypes of colour or inferiority. According to Ward Connerly, the racial gulf that we see in Blues for Mister Charlie has significantly narrowed considerably, thereby giving way to race-mixing. In an essay entitled, “Laying Down the Burden of Racism”, Connerly refers to the fact that:

But of all the positive data that have accumulated since the Civil Rights Act of 1964—when America finally decided to leave its racial past behind—the finding that gives me most hope is the recent survey showing that nearly 90 percent of all teenagers in America report having at least one close personal friend of another race. (Baldwin, 1971:118)

Today, America and the world are witnessing transformation in the issues that Baldwin dealt with which have to do with racial harmony and integration as demonstrated by Parnell. The ascendancy of Barack Obama as the first African American president of America, and a two-term president with high performance profile demonstrates this inevitable growing racial brotherhood. Obama’s broad-base acceptance and subsequent election as President is a fulfillment of Senator Robert F. Kennedy’s prophesy in the 1970s. It is also an attestation to the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. wherein he calls on America not to judge his four little children by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character. This injunction is directed to the American mainstream not to judge African Americans by their skin colour; they should rather be judged by what they can offer America as citizens.

Unfortunately, however, the recent acquittal of George Zimmerman by a Florida jury on charges of the murder of Trayvon Matins, a defenseless black youth last year [2012], and the spontaneous reaction and “peaceful demonstration” across American cities is a re-enactment of Baldwin’s drama which further confirms the truth that racism and prejudice cannot be eliminated in the United States of America, and indeed the world over.

However, in the light of the apparent improvements in America’s race relationship, the recommendation is for African Americans who are victims of slavery, racism and prejudice to, in the words of Connerly, “resist all of those, black and white, who want to rip open that scar and make race a raw and angry wound that continues to define and divide us” (Connerly, 2001:118). African Americans should lay down the burden of the past while white Americans should be bold enough to tender unreserved public apology for the crime of slavery and racism that consigned African Americans to suffering for more than three centuries. This can be achieved in the form of South Africa’s post-Apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a measure of compromise and accommodation of one another regardless of racial distinction. In the words of Reverend Jesse Jackson, “It is time for us to turn to each other, not on each other” [sms, 5820:23/06/2013]. Nothing can be more racially healing than these words of reconciliation and universal brotherhood.

REFERENCES


