

Dehumanization and Brutality of Slavery in Amiri Baraka's *Slave Ship*

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Abstract

Amiri Baraka's Slave Ship is a powerful and emotional play that shows the cruel and dehumanizing effects of slavery on African Americans. This paper looks at how Baraka brings the harsh realities of the Middle Passage the journey where Africans were forced into ships and taken to America to life on stage. He also shows the violence and suffering that continued during slavery in the United States. Using an experimental style, broken dialogue, and intense staging, Baraka makes the audience feel as if they are part of this painful history.

The play shows how enslaved Africans lost their identity and sense of being human due to the extreme brutality they faced. However, Baraka also shows that this suffering did not end with slavery; its effects have been passed down through generations. The violence in *Slave Ship* is shown not just for shock but to force people to confront the real horrors that are often hidden or softened in history books.

Through the sounds of screams, the clanking of chains, and moments of deep silence, Baraka gives voice to the pain of the oppressed. In doing so, *Slave Ship* turns theater into a space for remembering the past and resisting ongoing injustice. The play powerfully reminds us that the cruelty of slavery is not just a part of history but is deeply connected to the political and cultural life of America even today.

Key Word: African American Theatre

Amiri Baraka (1934–2014) was a major American poet, playwright, and activist whose work had a powerful impact on African American literature and political thought. Born Everett LeRoi Jones in Newark, New Jersey, Baraka became a leading voice of the Black Arts Movement, which sought to create art that reflected the struggles and hopes of Black people. His writing is known for its sharp critique of racism, its revolutionary spirit, and its experimental style. Throughout his career, Baraka used plays, poems, and essays to challenge social injustice and inspire Black pride and resistance. *Slave Ship*, one of his most important plays, highlights the brutal history of slavery and its lasting effects, using intense and unconventional techniques to engage and provoke audiences.

Amiri Baraka's *Slave Ship: A Historical Pageant* is a powerful and emotional play that traces the painful journey of Africans from their capture in Africa through the horrors of the Middle Passage, into slavery in America, and finally toward the struggle for freedom and resistance. The play is not structured like a traditional drama with a clear storyline; instead, it uses music, chanting, movement, and fragmented dialogue to create an intense and almost ritualistic experience for the audience.

The play begins with the violent capture of Africans in their homeland. These individuals are then forced onto slave ships where they suffer brutal and dehumanizing conditions. Baraka vividly shows the physical cruelty, emotional breakdown, and loss of cultural identity that the enslaved people endure. In addition to this, the journey across the Atlantic is filled with pain, disease, and death, yet also moments of collective spirit and resistance in order to alive their indigenous cultural heritage.

As the story goes forward, Baraka underlines the life of slaves on American plantations, where the violence and exploitation continue. Despite the immense suffering, the play shows that the will to resist never dies in the minds of the African Americans. Rebellion becomes a key theme, showing that the spirit of freedom survives even under the worst conditions. The final scenes of the play shift into the Civil Rights Movement and Black liberation struggles, connecting the past to the ongoing fight against racial injustice and inequality.

Slave Ship is not just a retelling of history but an emotional experience meant to make the audience feel the horror, rage, and hope of the Black experience. Through its unconventional form and powerful imagery, Baraka forces the audience to imagine the deep wounds of slavery and its lasting impact on American society.

In *Slave Ship*, Amiri Baraka significantly portrays the violent capture of Africans as the beginning of a long and brutal journey of dehumanization. The play opens with scenes of chaos and terror, as African people are attacked, bound, and discarded from their homeland by force. Baraka uses loud sounds, screams, and aggressive physical movements in order to make audience feel the harsh reality of American society against African Americans.

This violent removal is not just physical but deeply emotional and spiritual. The people are discarded from their families, communities, languages, and traditions. Their sense of identity is disturbed at the very start of the play. Baraka emphasizes that this brutal separation is the first step in a long process of crumbling their humanity, treating them not as individuals, but as objects to be sold and transported.

By staging the capture so vividly, Baraka demands that the audience confront the original violence. The trauma of being violently uprooted is shown not as an isolated event, but as the beginning of a system built on cruelty and domination, with affects that continues across generations. Beginning of the play predicaments of African people can clear through following conversation:

WOMAN-1 : She strangled herself with the chain Choked the child Oh,
Shango! Help us, Lord Oh, please.

WOMAN-2 : Why you leave us Lord?

MAN-1 :Dademi, Dademi ... She dead she dead... Dademi... ¹

In this excerpt from *Slave Ship*, the conversation between WOMAN-1, WOMAN-2, and MAN-1 shows the deep pain and suffering the enslaved people feel. WOMAN-1 says, "She strangled herself with the chain, Choked the child," showing how desperate the mother was. The chain, which usually keeps them trapped, becomes a way for her to end her pain. The choking of the child could show how slavery causes pain that passes from one generation to the next, even hurting innocent children.

WOMAN-2 keeps crying out, "Why you leave us, Lord?" showing how the enslaved feel abandoned by God. They call out to Shango, a god of thunder in African religion, showing they still hold onto their cultural roots even though slavery tried to take their identity away. MAN-1 mourns by repeating, "Dademi, Dademi... She dead, she

dead..." This shows the deep sadness and how death feels like a constant part of life for the enslaved. "Dademi" might be a real person or a symbol for all the lives lost during the Middle Passage and slavery.

In *Slave Ship*, Amiri Baraka highlights the Middle Passage as a critical moment in the history of the transatlantic slave trade, where the dehumanization of Africans reached its most extreme. The Middle Passage refers to the brutal sea journey that enslaved Africans were forced to endure as they were transported from Africa to the Americas. Baraka portrays this journey not only as a physical transportation but as the beginning of a psychological and spiritual death for many.

Baraka's depiction of the Middle Passage in *Slave Ship* is graphic, violent, and symbolic. The journey is portrayed as one of unimaginable suffering, where Africans are chained, crowded together, and forced to endure conditions that lead to death, disease, and despair. The play uses intense physical and auditory imagery such as the sounds of chains, screams, and clashing bodies to bring the audience into this space of suffering. Through these sensory details, Baraka forces the audience to confront the brutal, inescapable nature of this journey.

The Middle Passage, as Baraka presents it, serves as a symbol of the systematic stripping of humanity. Enslaved individuals are reduced to mere cargo, deprived of their dignity, identity, and culture. The violent conditions aboard the slave ships are designed to break both the body and the spirit of the Africans. The lack of space, constant physical abuse, and exposure to disease made the Middle Passage a death zone, where survival was a cruel, random occurrence. Baraka emphasizes this aspect of survival as being less about the preservation of life and more about the continuation of oppression where the very act of living becomes a form of torture.

Additionally, Baraka explores the psychological trauma that results from such extreme dehumanization. The play emphasizes the terror and despair felt by the enslaved individuals as they are forcibly removed from their homeland, separated from their families, and transported into a future of subjugation. The psychological toll of the journey, including a loss of cultural identity and the disintegration of family and community bonds, is highlighted throughout the play.

Baraka also suggests that the effects of the Middle Passage linger beyond the moment of crossing the Atlantic. The trauma, violence, and loss of humanity that occurred during this journey resonate throughout the play, continuing to shape the lives of African Americans for generations. The Middle Passage, in this context, is not only a physical location but a metaphor for the intergenerational impact of slavery, where the psychological scars of that journey are passed down, continuing to haunt those who descend from the enslaved.

In conclusion, Baraka uses the Middle Passage in *Slave Ship* as a stark representation of the dehumanization and brutality inherent in the transatlantic slave trade. Through vivid imagery and an experimental narrative structure, he brings to life the suffocating violence of the passage, forcing the audience to witness the enduring psychological and physical effects of this traumatic event. By portraying the Middle Passage as a site of extreme dehumanization, Baraka underscores the long-lasting impact of slavery on Black identity and the collective memory of African Americans. Hamid Hammad Abed states:

America is a melted pot and the state of democracy and freedom is not true as it is seen by Baraka. Seemingly, America is the state of

nonviolence and all its people regardless their colour are equal, but in fact, the blacks are dehumanized and socially marginalized and rejected. Eventually, Baraka's play is a scream against the capitalist America, and he desires to find an adequate social fairness for the oppressed and troubled black people.²

Amiri Baraka's *Slave Ship* presents both physical and psychological torture as central tools used to oppress and dehumanize enslaved Africans. Baraka vividly portrays intense violence through raw, visceral scenes that immerse the audience in the brutality of slavery. Physical torture appears in the control, chaining, beating, and killing of bodies. The play shows enslaved people suffering through whippings, suffocation in cramped ship holds, and brutal punishments. The haunting image of a mother strangling herself and her child with chains highlights the unbearable suffering they faced.

Alongside this physical abuse, Baraka explores the deeper wounds of psychological torture. The enslaved cry out to their gods and each other in desperation, showing emotional despair and a profound sense of isolation. Their forced separation from homeland, family, and culture leads to a loss of identity, worsened by the destruction of their languages and traditions. Fragmented dialogue and overwhelming sounds reinforce the psychological collapse of the enslaved, illustrating how slavery shattered their sense of self.

Through *Slave Ship*, Baraka makes it clear that slavery's violence was designed not only to control bodies but also to break spirits. His depiction of both physical and psychological torture forces the audience to confront the enduring trauma rooted in this brutal history. Werner, Craig states:

Slave Ship logically answers this dilemma. Making no pretense of presenting the full complexity of experience, freely reducing conflicts to black (good)-white (evil) configurations, Baraka's ritual drama issues a call to arms, embraces the very simplicity-violent resistance-which Clay cannot accept. Rejecting Dostoevsky's complex white consciousness, it embraces unambiguous black consciousness³

In Amiri Baraka's *Slave Ship*, violence is portrayed as a fundamental method used to maintain control over enslaved Africans. Throughout the play, violence is not random or chaotic; it is systematic, deliberate, and necessary to the functioning of the slave system. Physical brutality such as whipping, chaining, and forced suffocation is used to break the spirits of the enslaved and to enforce obedience through fear. By making suffering constant and visible, the oppressors ensure that resistance seems futile.

Baraka shows that violence extends beyond the body to deeply affect the mind. Psychological terror, created through isolation, destruction of cultural identity, and forced submission, is equally powerful. Enslaved individuals are stripped of their language, traditions, and faith, leaving them feeling powerless and disconnected. Even prayers and cries for help are met with silence, reinforcing a sense of abandonment and hopelessness.

The use of violence in *Slave Ship* is not portrayed as exceptional but as normal a routine part of the enslaved people's lives. Baraka's intense staging forces the audience to feel this oppressive atmosphere directly. In doing so, he highlights that violence was the essential tool for sustaining slavery, ensuring both physical domination and long-term psychological control over the enslaved population.

In *Slave Ship*, Amiri Baraka portrays resistance as a powerful response to the brutal dehumanization inflicted upon enslaved Africans. Despite the overwhelming physical and psychological violence, Baraka shows that the spirit of resistance never fully dies. The enslaved characters, even in their suffering, seek ways to reclaim their humanity and dignity. Acts of rebellion both small and large symbolize the refusal to accept complete domination.

Spiritual resistance plays a key role in the play. The characters' calls to African gods like Shango represent an effort to hold onto their cultural identity and spiritual power, even when stripped of their external freedoms. Baraka also highlights communal strength: even when individuals are beaten and broken, the collective memory of freedom and the shared longing for justice remain alive.

As the play moves through different historical periods, resistance evolves from survival on the slave ship to active revolt and, later, to the struggle for civil rights. This shows that resistance is not just immediate but generational, deeply rooted in the historical memory of oppression. Through *Slave Ship*, Baraka asserts that the legacy of slavery is not only one of victimization but also one of unbreakable defiance against dehumanization and injustice. "*Baraka knows full well that oppression cannot be destroyed by the literal dance which resolves Slave Ship . So he has backtracked from his relatively narrow black nationalist position to an interracial socialist revolutionary stance.*"⁴

In *Slave Ship*, Amiri Baraka designs the theatrical experience to force the audience into a direct confrontation with the historical trauma of slavery. Rather than presenting a distant or sanitized version of history, Baraka immerses viewers in the brutal reality of the Middle Passage and the legacy of racial violence. Through chaotic sounds, fragmented dialogue, and physical movement, he creates an overwhelming atmosphere where the audience feels the fear, pain, and loss experienced by the enslaved.

The play's structure non-linear, ritualistic, and emotionally charged denies the audience comfort or detachment. Instead, they are pulled into the suffering and resilience of the enslaved, experiencing the terror of capture, the horror of the ship's hold, and the cries for freedom. Baraka's use of music, chanting, and bodily expression blurs the line between performance and ritual, making the audience participants in remembering and mourning this shared history.

By confronting viewers with unfiltered images of violence and survival, Baraka challenges them to acknowledge the real and lasting impact of slavery on African American identity. *Slave Ship* thus becomes more than a historical retelling; it acts as a collective ceremony of remembrance, demanding emotional engagement and historical reckoning from everyone present. One of the interview Amiri Baraka states:

Baraka: Right. I tried to make African culture an absolute, a static absolute to which Afro-American culture related at all points in a static way. In the Coltrane book I'm trying to chart more accurately the path of art as a whole, Afro-American art specifically, especially in the period of Trane's life

[1920-1967], which is a very profound, very impressive period in the world. I'm trying to make a theory of art based on that singular experience⁵

Amiri Baraka's *Slave Ship* offers a profound and unflinching examination of the dehumanization and brutality that characterized the institution of slavery. Through experimental staging, intense physical and emotional imagery, and fragmented dialogue, Baraka recreates the traumatic experience of the Middle Passage and the systemic violence endured by enslaved Africans. The play reveals how slavery sought not only to control Black bodies but to annihilate their spirits, identities, and cultural connections. However, Baraka also emphasizes that amidst overwhelming suffering, acts of spiritual and communal resistance persisted, highlighting the resilience and enduring humanity of the oppressed. By forcing the audience to directly confront the horrors often hidden or minimized in historical narratives, *Slave Ship* transforms theater into a space of remembrance, resistance, and critical reflection. The dehumanization portrayed in the play is not confined to the past; it continues to resonate, influencing the ongoing struggles for justice and equality. Thus, Baraka's work stands as both a searing memorial to the victims of slavery and a powerful reminder of the necessity to acknowledge and confront the enduring legacies of racial violence in contemporary society.

References & Notes:

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