



A POSTMODERN STUDY OF *SOMEBODY BLEW UP AMERICA* BY AMIRI BARAKA

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<p>Received: June, 11th 2022 Accepted: July, 11th 2022 Published: August, 14th 2022</p>	<p>Like many other historical events, the attacks of September 11th, 2001 have been playing an important role in literature by fascinating plenty of literary figures. Since then, lots of novels, plays, and poems have been written revolving these attacks and their traumatic impacts on American people. Amiri Baraka whose writings are reputed due to his focus on racism and violence is no exception. He wrote <i>Somebody Blew Up America</i> as a reaction against these occurrences. This essay intends to analyze this poetic piece from a postmodern approach. To do so, the viewpoints of Lyotard as a postmodern critic are applied. It is found that Baraka has voiced his loss of faith in such metanarratives as unity, order, stability, and capitalism. This loss of belief is according to Lyotard, the main feature of postmodern era. Also, this poem includes some other postmodern techniques like dark humor, irony, and intertextuality</p>

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1. INTRODUCTION (GENERAL BACKGROUND)

Amiri Baraka (1934–2014) as the subject of analysis in this study was an American poet, playwright, novelist, and music critic. He was born in New Jersey, and joined Rutgers University for two years, then attended Howard University, where he got his B.A. degree in English. He also served in the Air Force from 1954 until 1957; next, he moved to Manhattan, where he joined a group of Greenwich Village artists, bands, and authors.

His first collection of poems entitled *Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note* was issued in 1961. In 1965, after Malcolm X was assassinated, Baraka moved to Harlem, where he established the Black Arts Repertory Theatre, producing plays that were written for black audiences. However, it got broken up after a few months. Throughout his entire life, he received lots of prizes, including the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation Award for Drama, and the Langston Hughes Award from the City College of New York (Gibson, 1973, p. 12).

This essay is an attempt to examine *Somebody Blew Up America* in the light of postmodernism in order to find and discuss this poem's postmodern features. Postmodernism which plays a chief role in the realm of literature refers to a feeling of cynicism toward the grand narratives of modernism as the "narratives about narratives of historical meaning, experience, or knowledge, which offer a society legitimation through the anticipated completion of a (as yet unrealized) master idea" (Lyotard, 1993, p. 29).

Postmodern literature also signifies a sort of literature that benefits from metafiction, unreliable narration, intertextuality, irony, black humor along with so many other techniques. John Barth as one of the American postmodern writers employed the concept "The Literature of Exhaustion" in order to discuss his view toward the postmodern literature, implying that "certain forms or . . . certain possibilities in fiction are used up" (Barth, 2002, p. 138).

The shocking effects of 9/11 are still existing, and the perceptive outcome that it has had on American society can only be explicated by its application to literature. Thus, this study aims at presenting an analysis of *Somebody Blow Up America*. Benefitting from Lyotard's attitudes proves that an astonishing technique to appreciate Baraka's poem is this French scholar's theory of the downfall of metanarratives.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Amiri Baraka is amongst the most important American literary figures. As a result, many researches have been carried out regarding the analysis of his works; for instance, "Poetry as a Form of Dissent: John F. Kennedy, Amiri Baraka, and the Politics of Art in Rhetorical Democracy" (2016) revolves around the reason why critics and literary figures like the already mentioned ones have paid more thorough attention to poetry as both a principle for articulating unorthodox messages and as a sample of how language play itself can act as a kind of treasured autonomous opposition.

In *Killing in the Name of Struggle: Amiri Baraka's Revolutionary Theatre* (2014) as another study, Kern has also investigated depictions of murder, homicide, and death in the groundbreaking plays of Baraka. "Amiri Baraka: A Lifetime of Saying the Unsayable" (2016) analyzes three poems of Baraka, and claims that a fundamental importance of the works of Amiri Baraka is the formation of art and scholarship that openly condemns and inflames "the status quo" (p. 265).

"Art as Resistance: Black Aestheticism in Amiri Baraka and Maya Angelou's Selected Poetry" (2021) addresses the workings of black literary figures in Afro-American art, and studies black experience and particularly the notion of Eurocentrism in the current era; this research is in fact an investigation of black experience accompanied by black aesthetics in art. These studies are just a few researches regarding Baraka's works, and there is a gap which this essay endeavors to fill. Thus, *Somebody Blew Up America* as one of his poems is going to be discussed in the light of Lyotard's philosophy of pessimism toward such grand narratives as capitalism and unity.

3. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE ON AMIRI BARAKA

Conversations with Amiri Baraka (1994) is a book which provides astonishing understanding of African-American literature and also the uproar and cravings of the "black experience" throughout the last decades of the 20th century. These conversations present a detailed perception of Baraka's works and his vocation. It is learnt that Baraka would review and elucidate his most renowned works in order to increase the understanding of the African-American involvement.

The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones (2012) is another significant book in which Baraka recalls and discusses his involvements in avant-garde literature after World War II and his role in Black nationalism after Malcolm X was murdered. *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (2001) discusses both Baraka's art and his political undertakings. This book is a helpful study due to depicting the association between this black literary figure and other black writers in order to appreciate their imaginative motivations. Furthermore, *From LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka, the Literary Works* (1971), *The Aesthetics of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka: The Rebel Poet* (2011), and *The Inside Songs of Amiri Baraka* (2021) form some other useful books in this study.

Concerning the theory of this study, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* is regarded as Lyotard's investigation of the possibility of extenuating some narratives that bring together the restrictions and social customs. Lyotard has expressed his skepticism towards metanarratives, and this disbelief has led to the establishment of little narratives. Lyotard has presumed that we no longer think of these narratives as being acceptable to signify and embrace all of us. In other words, people are now more preoccupied with change, diversity, the unsuitability of their objectives, values, and wishes, and this is the reason postmodernity has been described by a fertility of micro-narratives.

4. METHODOLOGY

In order to analyze *Somebody Blew Up America* from a postmodern approach, this paper will use the postmodernism literary theory. To do so, the viewpoints of different postmodern scholars such as Lyotard are applied. Postmodernism was firstly used in the 1940s as a reaction against the Modern movement. Though, it principally started to be extensively employed in the 1960s by American cultural critics and analysts who wanted to define a 'new sensibility' in literature which either declined modernist approaches and methods or revised or protracted them (Nicol, 2009, p. 1). In postmodernism, some techniques and features like fragmentation, bewilderment, intertextuality, humor, and irony are widespread. As a matter of fact, postmodernism assumes fragmentation as the only conceivable way of survival, and so running away from it is totally useless.

Lyotard distrusted the modernist trust in order, solidity, and harmony as a number of grand narratives, and also declared that modernism functions through these grand narratives, whereas postmodernism doubts and criticizes them. A grand narrative is in fact a story communicated by a society about its principles. According to postmodernism, grand narratives conceal and refute illogicalities, volatilities, and distinctions which are typical of any social arrangement.

The attacks of September 11th, 2001 have been the chief topic of many literary works which have tried to discuss that particular day's dismays. After these attacks, many poets and storywriters like Amiri Baraka decided to induce a sort of literature so as to comprehend the explanations and causes for national or universal violence and its influence on American people; they have been chiefly fond of depicting the imageries that this day created. By using the perspectives of Lyotard, this research seeks to demonstrate that the speaker in Baraka's poem has lost his belief in truth. In fact, the implication is in agreement with what Lyotard (1979) has stated that, "the postmodern era indicates that all comforting myths of intellectual mastery and truth are at an end" (p. 47).

5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Amiri Baraka whose poem is going to be analyzed in this part is mostly famous because of his obsession with the black Americans' rights of equality and freedom. Some of his writings have been celebrated as extremely artistic literary works while some others have been criticized harshly. Baraka would believe that an artist must serve people and use his art in favor of people. In other words, an artist's literature must reflect his society's anxieties. This is the reason he has been considered as an ideal role model for many young artists who are still fighting against different kinds of discrimination and inequality not only in America but also all over the world.

As a black writer, activist, and poet, Baraka has attracted many researchers like Hudson (1971) who declares that Baraka was not only a chief writer but also an extraordinarily provocative literary man. He was in fact one of those nonconformists, who has generated a huge number of works which are exceedingly opposed to American society. Baraka was also an annoyance to the American literary canon in some measure. And, accordingly, he would be the most challenging American writer to be assessed disinterestedly (p. xxvii).

His works would go through contrary feedbacks and reactions. For instance, Kimberly Benston proclaims in *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask* (1976) that, "Imamu Amiri Baraka is one of the foremost American artists of our century" (p. 52). On the other hand, Stanley Kauffmann says in *Dissent* that Baraka is "the luckiest man of our times, a writer who . . . would be less than lightly held if he did not happen to be a Negro at this moment in American history" (as cited in Ryan, 1991, p. 190).

Somebody Blew Up America and Other Poems (2003) is Amiri Baraka's reaction against the attacks of September 11th, 2001. Analysis of the poem shows his anger and thirst to reach a clear answer regarding who the real terrorist is. It seems as if he is thirsty to know the reason and responsible people for such brutal assaults. This poem exceedingly condemns racism and capitalism in America, and contains humorous portrayals of such people as Trent Lott, Clarence Thomas, and Condoleezza Rice. Such humorous depictions can be also instances of irony and sarcasm because they are "aggressive humor that pokes fun" (Martin, 2007, p. 13). Furthermore, this poem encompasses some lines, according to which Israel must have been aware of the attacks.

Concerning Baraka's connection with postmodernism, it is found that the years that he spent in Greenwich Village caused him to get a master of postmodern techniques that he employed in his own work and transferred to such younger black artists as Nikki Giovanni and Haki Madhubuti. Incongruously, postmodern notions of form adhered easily with the new black artist's wish to discuss his own oral traditions; the free verse and the unconventional formatting of the white postmodern were perfect tools for black oral manifestation and practice (Hudson, 1971, p. xxvii).

One of the remarkable postmodern points about this poem is Baraka's disappointment and pessimism toward the government. This issue is in line with Lyotard's views in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) that the influence of the postmodern condition has been to incite cynicism towards the universalizing systems. Lyotard (1979) has referred to postmodernism as an "incredulity towards meta-narratives" (p. 7), which is noticeably perceived in Baraka's poetic piece. Waugh (2006) notes:

Throughout history, Lyotard argues, society has been founded upon metanarratives which legitimate the social bond and the relationship of science and knowledge to it. These metanarratives (Marxism, Liberalism, Fundamentalism, the progress of Man) are stories or principles that give credibility to a society and justify its actions and visions of the future. (p. 412)

According to Baraka's poem, such grand narratives as capitalism and unity have lost their reliability since the Second World War and the attacks of September 11th reinforce this viewpoint. The postmodern condition, as Lyotard labels it, embodies discontent with metanarratives. As a matter of fact, no complete system or metanarrative can be found any longer. The implication of this incredulity towards metanarratives is what Lyotard calls "delegitimation" as the process by which metanarratives lose their incitement to legitimize discourses. According to Lyotard (1979):

In contemporary society and culture — postindustrial society, postmodern culture — the question of the legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms. The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation. (p. 37)

Lyotard is chosen as the major critic of this study because he questioned and doubted the modern social philosophy. According to him, the influence of the postmodern condition was to aggravate suspicion about "universalizing" theories. This French intellectual also claims that we have expanded our requirements for metanarratives owing to the progression of systems and technologies since World War II. In other words, a metanarrative or grand narrative which was initially employed by Lyotard refers to a theory that struggles to give an inclusive description of different historical events and societal occurrences.

In the following lines which belong to the poem, Baraka clearly refers to his disbelief and anger with lies, capitalism, and disguises. He refers to the history of slavery, murdering Indians, and racial discriminations. The repetition of the word "who" emphasizes his knowledge of the responsible ones and this is why these questions can be regarded as rhetorical questions.

They say (who say?)
Who do the saying
Who is them paying
Who tell the lies
Who in disguise

Who had the slaves
Who got the bux out the Bucks
Who got fat from plantations
Who genocided Indians
Tried to waste the Black nation

Likewise, in the subsequent lines Baraka asks some other questions which show his attitude toward the white community with its capitalism and how it has always been superior to the black. He wants to say that most of these deeds are done by the white due to their greed for more power and authority. These people have the power to make rules, own money, and control others' lives. This is the reason why during most of his writing vocation, Baraka's style in poetry, plays, fiction, and essays was viewed as being highly argumentative and against capitalism; in other words, Baraka intended to rouse his audiences to the political distresses of black people in America. This issue has been also underlined by other writers; for instance, in *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* (1973), Henderson writes, "[Baraka] is the central figure of the new black poetry awakening" (p. 48). In *Modern Black Poets*, Donald B. Gibson also calls him "the high priest of this new Black literary renaissance and one who has done most to shape its course" (p. 90).

Who stole Puerto Rico
Who stole the Indies, the Philipines, Manhattan
Australia & The Hebrides
Who forced opium on the Chinese
Who own them buildings
Who got the money
Who think you funny
Who locked you up
Who own the papers
Who own what ain't even known to be owned
Who own the owners that ain't the real owners
Who own the suburbs
Who suck the cities
Who make the laws

The next lines depict Baraka's viewpoints regarding George W. Bush and Israel. In fact, he supposed that both Israelis and Bush were already aware of the attacks because about four thousand Israeli workers in the towels were not there on September 11th. In this poem, Amiri Baraka alludes continuously to many historical examples of oppression in order to persuade his audiences to decide correctly about the responsible authorities.

Who made Bush president
Who believe the confederate flag need to be flying
Who talk about democracy and be lying
Who the Beast in Revelations
Who know who decide
Jesus get crucified
Who the Devil on the real side
Who got rich from Armenian genocide
Who knew the World Trade Center was gonna get bombed
Who told 4000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers
To stay home that day
Why did Sharon stay away?

Marable and Greene (2002) had a conversation with Amiri Baraka in which he talked about his childhood memories and how his family would be racially oppressed. For example, he said:

I saw my mother do all kinds of things, short of boxing with those people. In Newark, we were in Fanny Farmer Candies one time, and she said, "I want a pound of these," and the saleswoman said, "Oh, you mean the nigger toes?" And my mother says, "Those are Brazil nuts, lady." I was a little boy, but you know what I heard, I heard her tone—that that's the way you deal with that. (p. 7)

This statement justifies Baraka's constant struggles with racism and capitalism, leading him to be extensively engaged in political issues and defend his fellow American countrymen. He declared, "We are Americans. We want our full citizenship rights. We want reparations, we want political power, we want regional autonomy. Those are clearly things that have to be dealt, negotiated, you understand? Now the threat of "you got a gun" and all that—now, you'll lock me up" (Marable & Greene, 2002, p. 13). It can be inferred that each line in Baraka's poem refers to racial extremism and capitalism as the central motivation behind the attacks.

6. CONCLUDING NOTES

This essay was a postmodern examination of *Somebody Blew Up America* by Amiri Baraka as a celebrated black literary figure in America. Thus, it was attempted to find the features which highlight this poem's postmodern facet. As a poem which was written after the attacks of September 11th, 2001, *Somebody Blew Up America* revolves

around Baraka's distrust and loss of faith in the many metanarratives. Thus, Lyotard's viewpoints could be of great significance and help in analyzing this particular literary work. First, Amiri Baraka and his career were briefly discussed. It was stated that Baraka would think of art as a useful means to discuss his political concerns. Racism was amongst the most remarkable themes in almost all his works and thus, he would use his art to put an end to racial discriminations.

Then, it was specified that although his works have been studied and reviewed by so many scholars, there is a gap regarding the analysis of this poem from a postmodern approach. Hence, it was essential to discuss the selected methodology after presenting a short review of literature on Amiri Baraka. In the discussion section, it was also attempted to provide the readers with a detailed investigation of the poem. Examination of *Somebody Blew Up America* showed that Baraka benefitted from such postmodern techniques as irony, allusion which is a sort of intertextuality, and black humor in order to emphasize his pessimism and irritation with lies, capitalism, and discriminations. In this poem which consists of so many rhetorical questions, Baraka attempts to remind the audiences of numerous instances of oppressions imposed on black Americans. He believes that the president and Israel's government had previous knowledge of the attacks.

As it was noticed, such historical events as September 11th attacks form the foundation of many poems, plays, and novels. These occurrences have provided such figures as Amiri Baraka a tool to discuss their concerns from a new point of view. Although Baraka's poem faced some accusations, he could fulfill his desire according to which art is a means to help the oppressed people. Many black writers and poets in America have been incessantly trying to get rid of the racial discriminations. Therefore, they use literature to achieve their goals. This issue highlights the significant role of literature in today's world, and its capability to awaken awareness.

Although this study sought to present a postmodern analysis of *Somebody Blew Up America*, the limited space and time did not allow the researcher to make use of other postmodern critics' theories. Hence, a recommendation for further possible researches with the aim of understanding the postmodern perspectives of Amiri Baraka is to scrutinize his other writings because such studies can result in a better understanding of this black American writer's viewpoints. Additionally, another limitation or problem of this study was because of postmodernism's generation of this viewpoint that all assertions may be the efforts made by thirst of power. However, the chief flaw of postmodernism is its inherent contradiction. So, much research is required to eradicate this problem.

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