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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Rebelling against the Dominant White Culture: Foucauldian Study of the Concept of Power in Imamu Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman*

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#### Abstract:

The present research studies Imamu Amiri Baraka's well-known and Obie Award winning play, *Dutchman* (1964), in the light of Michel Foucault's ideas in order to scrutinize the notion of power and the possibilities of resistance against power in the society of America during 1960s. The main focus of this research is to analyze the main characters of *Dutchman*, Clay and Lula, in terms of the possibilities of resistance to the prevailing power and of trying different modes of being a self in the society of the United States during 1960s, known as the era of Civil Rights movements, which is an unrest period in the history of America. The dynamics of relationship between white and black Americans in contemporary U. S. made this play an appropriate work of art for Foucauldian study of the notion of power and the possibility of resistance. Foucault's importance in literary criticism is in his new definitions of social and cultural institutions like power, knowledge, sexuality, etc. Foucault's conception of power is a modern one since it rejects the traditional negative and repressive nature of the concept and defines it in terms of a productive force, although oppressive. Foucault believes power is a strategy which is present in all layers of society and all relations and produces identities through instruments such as normalization. This research shows that a Foucauldian resistance does not lead to total freedom of power, but it includes an individual's performing some possible actions in the scope that is defined by power itself.

**Key words:** Domination, Normalization, Panopticon, Power, Resistance

#### Introduction Michel Foucault<sup>1</sup> and the Definition of Power

The modern definition of power starts with Foucault's construction of what we can call a new ontology of power (During 130) against the traditional or sovereign power. He tries to change the traditional view (e.g. Hegel and Marx's ideas) towards power as an object that is owned by the powerful and by means of which they oppress the powerless. He considers it more as a net or a chain and tries to examine the way that power operates between people and institutions in everyday relations (Mills 33). To him it is something which is done and performed in a certain context, and, as Mills states, Foucault does not define power as something "which can be held onto" but as something that is performed "something more like a strategy than possession" (35). "Whereas in classical society, power was fixed, visible, mappable" Foucault's radical revision of what power is considers it as "uncontainable, untheorizable and productive" (During 119).

This new form of power is rooted in the social and cultural texture, circulates through it and controls people through "normalization". What is normal in a society is defined through different sciences and through social and cultural trends. They set standards of normality and consequently classify individuals as normal or abnormal. Hence people constantly try to regulate themselves in order not to be categorized as abnormal. In other words, modern power does not operate by being visible but by making its non-conformist target flagrant or too visible. According to this we can assert that the dominant themselves are confined within the power network.

<sup>1</sup> Paul-Michel Foucault (15 October 1926 – 25 June 1984) was a French philosopher, archeologist, historian, university professor, and historian of ideas. Foucault is famous for his social and cultural surveys, and his writings about discourse, power, knowledge, and history of sexuality.

For Foucault, power is something which is present in all types of relationships and should be analyzed as something which circulates or something that “functions in the form of a chain”. It is a net-like organization in which individuals “are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power”. They are not just the targets of power, but the means through which it is exercised. They help in articulating power and are not only “its point of application” (*Power/Knowledge* 98). So, rather than considering it as an entity located in a centralized position, Foucault “is interested in local forms of power” (Mills 36) and in the way that they are met by individuals and organization:

I am not referring to power with capital P, dominating and imposing its rationality upon the totality of the social body. In fact, there are power relations. They are multiple; they have different forms, they can be in play in family relations, or within an institution, or an administration. (cited in Mills 35)

So, all kinds of relations between people are power relations and in each interaction power is negotiated and, no matter how flexible it may be, a hierarchy is established (Mills 49) and this hierarchy is constantly being challenged.

In order to depict the function of power, Foucault introduces the term “panopticism”. The Panopticon, was an architectural figure designed at the end of eighteenth century by Jeremy Bentham. Foucault describes it as:

A perimeter building in the form of a ring. At the center of this, a tower, pierced by large windows opening on to the inner face of the ring. The outer building is divided into cells each of which traverses the whole thickness of the building. These cells have two windows, one opening to the inside, facing the windows of the central tower, the other, outer one allowing daylight to pass through the whole cell. All that is then needed is to put an overseer in the tower and place in each of the cells a lunatic, a patient, a convict, a worker or a schoolboy. The back lighting enables one to pick out from the central tower the little captive silhouettes in the ring of the cells. In short, the principle of the dungeon is reversed; daylight and the overseer’s gaze capture the inmate more effectively than darkness, which afforded after all a sort of protection (*Power/Knowledge* 147).

The structure of the Panopticon makes it possible for a guardian, or a limited number of guardians to observe the many people who are confined in the Panopticon from the central tower; while the walls between the cells keeps each confined individual separated from the other.

The most important function of the Panopticon is observation. It impels the inmates to believe that they are visible to and are constantly observed by the guardian. This visibility is a trap and guarantees the functioning of power. The inmates of the Panopticon are totally seen without ever seeing, and in the central tower, one can see everything but is never seen. This is very important since it automatizes and disindividualizes power. According to Foucault the Panopticon is “a marvelous machine which, whatever use one may wish to put it to produces homogenous effects of power” (*Discipline and Punish* 202). It is understood that even at times when nobody is present in the central tower, the inmates are still forced to act as if they are being observed. This creates a very peculiar form of power relation: those who are being observed are pressed to act in a certain way and to obey certain behavioral limits even though the overseer may be absent; in such situations one will play both roles, the observer and the observed, at the same time, and there would be:

No need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself (*Power/Knowledge* 155).

So the Panopticon is not just a dream building, it gives power over people’s minds through architecture. By taking the Panopticon as a symbol, it can be said that it is a diagram of power reduced to its ideal form; for Foucault, the Panopticon stands for the way in which discipline and punishment work in modern society. It represents a sort of power relation that is exercised in the society through apparatuses like school, hospital, prison, the public media and etc. that prevents people from doing wrong; it makes them unwilling and unable to act against the norms or as Foucault puts it, the Panoptic schema takes “away their wish to commit wrong” (*Power/Knowledge* 154).

In the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault states that “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (95). This concept of power is productive since it does not consider the relationship of those in struggle over power

as simply a master-slave relationship, or an oppressor-victim relationship. Foucault believes that in order there to be a power relationship, there has to be someone who resists power, so for him resistance is written into the exercise of power. Resistance is something positive that should not be understood in terms of force relations, but in terms of creative traversing of the field of possible actions, and in which a subject becomes autonomous with a structured set of institutions and practices through immanent critique.

The main focus of this research is to analyze the main characters of Amiri Baraka's play, *Dutchman*<sup>2</sup>, Clay and Lula, by making a relation between the power structures presented, and the reaction of the main two characters to them. The following questions generate the basis of this study:

1. How does power as a productive and positive strategy keep individuals in state of submission?
2. Are there any possibilities of resistance to power?
3. How do different characters show resistance?
4. Does character's resistance fit Foucault's suggested method of confronting power?
5. How does disciplinary power effect the characters?

## 2. Foucauldian Study of Power and Resistance on Baraka's *Dutchman*

*Dutchman* focuses mainly on its two major characters Lula a 30-year-old white woman, and Clay, a 20-year-old black man. Both ride the subway in New York City. Lula, eating an apple, gets on the train and sits down next to Clay. Clay and Lula engage in a long, flirtatious dialogue during the train ride. Lula accuses Clay of gazing at her buttocks. Lula does not pay attention to Clay's denials and uses clichés to correctly guess where he lives, where he is going, and what Clay's friend, Warren, looks and talks like. Lula accurately guesses that Clay wanted to get his own sister to have sex with him when he was ten. He is surprised by Lula's apparent knowledge of his past and says that she must be a friend of Warren.

Lula is happy that Clay is so easy to seduce puts her hand on his knee and rubs his leg. She gives him apples. She asks Clay to invite her to the party he is going to. Lula implies to having sex with Clay after the party:

LULA: Would you like to get involved with me, Mister Man?

CLAY: Sure, Why not? A beautiful woman like you. Huh, I'd be a fool not to. (*Dutchman and The Slave* 11)

Clay is glad by Lula's apparent affection, but Lula becomes angry by Clay's not falling for her seductive tricks. She changes tactics and ridicules Clay's Anglo-American speech, his academic education and his three-button suit. She mocks Clay's being black and passive:

LULA: ... What've you got that jacket and tie on in all this heat for? And why're you wearing a jacket and tie like that? Did your people ever burn witches or start revolutions over the price of tea? Boy, those narrow-shoulder clothes come from a tradition you ought to feel oppressed by ... What right do you have to be wearing a three-button suit and striped tie? Your grandfather was a slave, he didn't go to Harvard. (*Dutchman and The Slave* 18)

Lula dances ridiculously in an R&B style and tells Clay to join her and "do the nasty. Rub bellies". Clay, who does not answer at the beginning, finally grasps her and throws her down. Clay slaps Lula twice and tells her to leave him alone. The first Scene finishes with Lula's claim that Clay is a murderer.

Clay declares a fairly-long monologue. He proposes that white people let black people dance "black" dances and make "black" music. Clay says if black people stopped trying to cure their pain through dance, music, civic participation, religion, or concentrating on moving upwards in American society, and became coldly rational like white people; black people would just murder all the whites in order to get rid of racism in America. Clay claims if he were to take Lula's assertions to heart, he should just murder all the white people he visits.

Although Clay declares all this assertion, he deeply refuses this plan of action. He asserts that he does not want to assassinate and that he likes to be ignorant of the problem. Instead, Clay says he would rather pretend to be ignorant of racism, not try to escape of it by fighting with whites. Clay wants to leave the train, but Lula calmly stabs him twice to the heart. Lula leads all the other passengers, blacks and whites, in the train car to throw Clay's

<sup>2</sup> *Dutchman* is the most famous play written by African-American writer Imamu Amiri Baraka. It was performed at the Cherry Lane Theatre in Greenwich Village, New York in March 1964 and won an Obie Award. *Dutchman* may be referred as a political allegory explaining black/white relations during 1960s.

body out and get out at the next stop. The play finishes with Lula looking towards another solitary young black man who has just entered the train and sited several seats behind her. Lula turns back and gazes at him. An old black train conductor enters into the train, greets Lula by tipping his hat, and continues through the door of the car.

*Dutchman* informed white American people about the true dynamics of American racism and the black disgust with whites which was regarded by many white Americans as hateful; they understood the truth that black people has many reasons to hate white people. *Dutchman* can be a metaphor of the interaction between black and white people in the United States. Regarding the historical background, this play represents the forbidden sexual relationship between a white woman and a naïve black man. During the history of the United States, white woman was a forbidden fruit for black man because those who are historically aware know that this kind of relationship led to the assassination of black men (Watts 72 – 74).

Foucault declares that classifying individuals into “normal” and “abnormal” will be effective when they are made to judge themselves according to this division. With the help of normalization, power creates marginal beings and labels all forms of behavior that may threaten the maintenance of power as wrong or abnormal (Vas 7). But Baraka’s *Dutchman* is a reconstructing move from margin to the center. It is a move from slavery to sophistication. Baraka’s play serves to reinforce the operations of power. Baraka’s involvement in the patterns of resistance against slavery, unmasks the realities of power network. Lula is the colonizer who pushes the black people such as Clay to the margin. In other words, Lula needs more and more in order to define and represent her own power, but Clay is the marginal colonized who wants to redefine his sense of self by writing pieces of literature and becoming an artist.

Baraka’s play is a link between the literary texts and the realities of power in American history during 1960s. Baraka reveals and criticizes severely the superiority of white Americans over Afro-Americans. But hegemony, in which the dominant class prescribes the ideology for all the classes of the society, stops him; a hegemony that supports the separation of white from black people, a separation which leads to the death of Clay. But Baraka’s play defends flux and change within the society in 1960s. We witness cracks in the dominant power through which resistant perspectives are formulated, shaped, and represented (especially when Clay slaps Lula and threatens her to death). But the dominant position (Lula) then reasserts herself, transforming herself to maintain her authority.

Baraka intentionally intends to represent the hidden layers of power as a chain or a web in American society by the making characters like Lula and Clay in this play. Lula represents white America and its death-dealing temptations to all black people who think they have reached the ranks of “acceptable”. Clay as a resistant character against the dominant power of white Lula first disguises his rage behind a mask, but when he explodes and slaps Lula twice very hard, we witness the truth:

CLAY: I could murder you now. Such a tiny ugly throat. I could squeeze it flat, and watch you turn blue on a humble. For dull kicks. All these weak-faced ofays squatting around here, staring over their papers at me. Murder them too. ... It takes no great effort. For what? To kill you soft idiots. You don’t understand anything but luxury. (*Dutchman and The Slave* 33)

It is Clay’s rage and resistance which makes the study of power relations possible. The dominant power of Lula as the representation of white American creates its own opposing force, but she is conscious about the dissident character of Clay (white people were aware of the repressed rage of black people and they preferred such rage and anger remain hidden or repressed). But whenever that anger comes out vividly, white people like Lula respond inimically, “perhaps even with murder” (Watts 71).

Lula is the “panoptical force” who knows almost everything about Clay and it seems that she controls him easily during the whole play. The traditional norms in the United States during 1960s to serve white society, and what the white society expected of black people were service, obedience, and self-effacement. For instance, in the first pages of the play, Lula tells Clay: “I told you that I don’t know anything about you ... you’re a well-known type” (*Dutchman and The Slave* 12). Lula considers Clay as the black “other”. Clay does everything to prevent it, but Lula attempts to make clear their “racial difference”. In fact, it is Clay’s “cultural assimilation that makes him vulnerable to Lula’s evil intentions, for he is preoccupied with the belief that he is just ‘one of the crowd’” (Watts 71).

Lula does not show any kind of resistance to the power structure and the set rules she is expected to obey. Lula is a passive character that does not show any form of resistance, she is not an active agent to question the situation, and therefore she does not try alternative forms of being a self. Clay is an active agent of motivating volition in the play. He is an active agent who tries his best to challenge and resist the prevailing power whenever it contradicts his personal opinions. He crosses the boundaries of American society by slapping Lula and condemning her. Clay attempts to define his own self, he is a person who not only expresses his criticism towards what he

disagrees with, but also he displays his feelings and ideas. It becomes clear when Clay launches into a fairly long monologue near the end of the play:

CLAY: If I'm a middle-class fake white man ... let me be. ... 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. ... I sit here, in this button-up suit, to keep myself from cutting all your throats. (*Dutchman and The Slave* 34)

This monologue is the most important section of the play because Clay reveals his wishes against the dominant power and recommends that white people let black people dance “black” dances and make “black” music.

Foucault's suggestion about how to resist society's normalizing effects is by denying the self which is imposed on us. In other words, in a normalized society, acting against the norms would position the subject in an isolated condition. Foucault's hopeful attitude of revolting against the norms at the same time as accepting their reality cannot be reached without paying the price. For Clay, the price to pay for her personal wishes was his death. He does not submit to any value he himself does not consider acceptable. For Clay, living in such a society is not equal to humanity and therefore he does not substitute Lula's ideas for his own; he makes decisions based on his own thoughts and beliefs.

## Conclusion

Foucault's definition of power and his theories on the possibilities of resistance conveys a different meaning from the general understanding of the term. By rejecting the traditional model of power as a repressive force that was limited to a single source like a king or a queen, Foucault defines power as a productive strategy that works through all layers of a society, and is present in all relations.

Baraka's *Dutchman* produces the appearance of being passive when we confront the character of Clay. But Baraka does not aim to show himself and black people as passive creatures. He takes the position of an active politician alongside a literary scholar at the same time. The United States with its hierarchal order represents a structure of power with the white people on the high rank. Regarding the major characters of the play, contrary to Lula, Clay is an active agent. He reacts to what he considers wrong. Clay, as an active subject, has an attitude to criticize the norms among white and black Americans. It is impossible to act outside the power structure of the society. However Clay traverses the field of possible actions. Clay's resistance brings him independence as a young man and finally it costs his death. But Clay's action at the end of the play shows that his actions lead to an emotional and influential ending.

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