

## **Hyper Masculinity in Baraka's A Poem for Black Hearts.**

Asst. Lect Shamam Ismail Otaiwi

English Department/ Al-Maarif University College

[Shamam@uoa.edu.iq](mailto:Shamam@uoa.edu.iq)

Asst. Lect Aliaa Abed Mohsen

English Department/ Al-Maarif University College

[Aliaa.abd@uoa.edu.iq](mailto:Aliaa.abd@uoa.edu.iq)

Asst. Lect Waleed Khalid Rzayyig

English Department/ Al-Maarif University College

[Waleedkhalid@uoa.edu.iq](mailto:Waleedkhalid@uoa.edu.iq)

### **Abstract:**

The predominant part of gender studies is dedicated to feminist issues, exposing the injustice towards women and their subordination to men. If our goal is to expose the entire spectrum of inequality, more light should be shed on the other side of the coin, i.e. masculine studies. African American masculinity in particular needs more attention, the poetry of the African American poet Amiri Baraka's is a fascinating case on the topic. Many researchers examined his militant poems and his Marxist inclination. However, Hyper masculinity in Amiri Baraka's poetry requires further research. Thus, this paper examines hyper masculinity in A poem for black hearts in view of Bell Hooks'

remarks in her essay *Reconstructing Black Masculinity*. Bell Hooks' essay offers useful insights in examining the masculinity of African American men and more particularly African American writers. This paper concludes that Amiri Baraka's portrayal of Black men as hyper-masculine and dominant proves that he belongs to the group of African writers who believes that elevating the masculinity of black men is the only way to combat racial oppression.

**Key Words:** (hyper masculinity, Amiri Baraka , Bell hooks, *Reconstructing black masculinity* , Malcolm X).

### الذكورة المفترطة في قصيدة بركت للقلوب السوداء

شمام اسماعيل عطوي

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية / كلية المعارف الجامعية

علياء عبد محسن

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية / كلية المعارف الجامعية

وليد خالد رزيق

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية / كلية المعارف الجامعية

### الملخص:

الجزء السائد من دراسات النوع مكرس للقضايا النسوية ، وكشف الظلم تجاه المرأة وتبعية الرجل لها. إذا كان هدفنا هو كشف النطاق الكامل لعدم المساواة ، فيجب إلقاء المزيد من الضوء على الجانب الآخر من العملة، أي الدراسات الذكورية. تحتاج الرجولة الأمريكية الأفريقية على وجه الخصوص إلى مزيد من الاهتمام، وشعر الشاعر الأمريكي من أصل

أفريقي أميرى بركة هو حالة رائعة حول هذا الموضوع. قام العديد من الباحثين بفحص قصائده المقاتلة وميله الماركسي. ومع ذلك، فإن الذكورية المفرطة في شعر أميرى بركة تتطلب المزيد من البحث. وهكذا، تبحث هذه الورقة في الذكورة المفرطة في قصيدة للقلوب السوداء في ضوء ملاحظات بيل هوكس في مقالها "إعادة بناء الرجولة السوداء". تقدم مقالة بيل هوكس رؤى مفيدة في فحص رجولة الرجال الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي وبشكل أكثر تحديداً الكتاب الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي. تخلص هذه الورقة إلى أن تصوير أميرى بركة للرجل الأسود على أنه رجل شديد الذكورة ومهيمن يثبت أنه ينتمي إلى مجموعة الكتاب الأفارقة الذين يؤمنون بأن رفع مستوى رجولة الرجال السود هو السبيل الوحيد لمكافحة الاضطهاد العنصري.

الكلمات المفتاحية: (الرجولة المفرطة، أميرى بركة، خطاف الجرس، إعادة بناء الذكورة السوداء ، مالكولم إكس).

### **Introduction:**

The majority of gender studies focus on feminist issues, they bring to light the marginalization of women in societies due to oppressive outdated presumptions by the patriarchy. Nevertheless, in many societies around the world, even some men are subjugated to oppression by the same patriarchal mindset. This calls for the need to conduct more research in the field of masculine studies. Masculine studies emerged in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is a dynamic, interdisciplinary field of study mainly concerned with the socially constructed ideal of what it means to 'be a man'.

These studies draw much-needed attention to the injustice ‘some men’ face because of the pressure placed on them to internalize the expectations of society which dictates the way they act and think.

The socially constructed idea of Manhood places an extreme amount of pressure on young boys and men to behave in a certain way. This binary thinking dictates how men act and forbid them from showing any emotion (other than anger) or being open and vulnerable. The reason behind this is the association between emotions with femininity. Thus, anything that is connected with femininity is forbidden for men and is thought to strip men from their masculinity. This binary frame of mind is harmful to both men and women alike. People tend to use phrases such as “man up” or “don’t act like a little girl” to shame boys if they showcase any feelings even worse if they cry. This can have a damaging impact on men by depriving them of showing genuine feelings which is like taking away a part of their humanity. Most importantly, research shows that suicide rates are significantly higher for men compared to women.

Correspondingly, when it comes to Black masculinity research has shown that black men are subjugated to far worse pressure.

Malton states that Black masculinity "is situated at the intersection of masculine entitlement and devalued blackness." (Malton, 2019). The social categories of what it means to be a man and what it means to be black are quite contradictory. As a result, black men experience their manhood in a unique way. To fully appreciate and understand the concept of African American masculinity, one has to contextualize it within the African American experience taking into consideration historical, psychological, and social factors. Many researchers point out that it is hard to define black masculinity without mentioning the effect of white masculinity in codifying black masculinity. Critic Josef Benson states that black slaves were conditioned to be subjugated by white men so that whites can maintain their hegemonic masculinity. After the abolition of slavery, white masculinity was threatened and in order for them to maintain their white privilege, they "constructed the myth of the black rapist as an excuse for the brutal killing of African American men" ( Benson , 2014 , xiii).

Moreover, Slavery left an everlasting impact on the masculinity of African-American men. It pre-determined them to occupy a subordinate role while validating the notion of white male supremacy. Black men were commoditized to profit-making

bodies and they had to perform physical activities which require strength in inhuman labor conditions. This brutal treatment was justified by circulating the stereotype of black men as “big, strong, and stupid” (Collins, 2005) as well as violent.

After the abolition of slavery, men of color felt the need to claim back their manhood. This need was best described by Eldridge Cleaver who articulated a basic tenant of black masculinity in 1965. He declared “We shall have our manhood. We shall have it or the earth will be leveled by our attempts to gain it.” Cleaver voiced a central strain of Black Power movement rhetoric. The advocates of black power linked masculinity with their political radicalism. Since, the conventional ideals of masculinity or hegemonic masculinity are already established by white men, that propagates men to be dominant, aggressive, physically powerful ....etc. Some African men followed these ideals. Subsequently, this contributed to solidifying the stereotype of the African–American man as a brutal rapist monster. This stereotypical image is still evident in today's culture. Dennis Rome clarifies that black men are portrayed as “the black demons of society”. (Rome, 2004)

Within popular culture, African–American men are reduced to an object. They're often looked at as no more than just a body, a strong physical body. The "bad boy" trope is romanticized in today's culture, and it is celebrated. Popular culture often “glamorize brute patriarchal maleness” (Hooks, 2004) by constantly pushing a single narrative of Black masculinity. Nevertheless; the hyper–masculinity of African American men is not an inherent trait, and it can be analyzed in many ways. First and foremost, it is a reaction to the emasculation of African–American men by their white Masters who deprived them of their humanity and masculinity during the days of slavery. Additionally, it can be argued that African–American men were influenced by the ideals of masculinity of white men, in other words, they wanted to be just like what their white Masters used to be. Thus, they inherited the traits of toxic masculinity from their white counterparts.

Due to the interconnectedness between African American art form and life. Many African American artists utilized the ‘bad man’ image in their literary works. The popular culture demanded and fetishized the black bad man trope. Thus, the black masculine aesthetic is widely popular “The notion of a strong black male—

irreverent, angry, defiant and many times violent—is pervasive in gangsta rap music”. This badman trope is characterized by Robin Kelley”(1996). This much-celebrated and circulated image of black men mirrors the extreme conception of the black man trope by white middle-class people.

### **Amiri Baraka**

The defiant unapologetic voice of Amiri Baraka (1934–2014) is one of the leading voices in African American literature. He started the Black Arts Movement together with Larry Neal. The infamous poet dedicated the majority of his literary works to free the minds of African American people from their inferiority complex and voice their needs by subverting the notion of white supremacy. Many of his poems and plays glorify the manhood of African American men and depict them as hyper-masculine and dominant. African American Men in his literary works are usually obsessed with dominating others, physically strong and violent as opposed to the way white men are pictured in writings. While his writings defied white supremacy, it can also be argued that some of them affirmed "white supremacist stereotypes of Black masculinity as savage, sexually driven, and vacuous” (Windsor, 2013)



Bearing in mind that being emotional and expressing one's feelings does not go along with the basic principles of hyper-masculinity, it is quite remarkable that Amiri Baraka utilized poetry which is arguably the most emotionally charged and expressive art form to showcase and validate the notion of hyper-masculinity. Baraka celebrated and glorified the hyper-masculinity of African American men and deemed those whom he saw as less masculine by heaping insults. Accordingly, by pushing the narrative which depicts black men as aggressive, he participated in spreading the demanded image of black men within mainstream culture. In the same vein, this image of black was the appropriate tool to fight back against the degradation of black people and men in particular by mainstream culture according to many African American writers. According to Barak, while white men were attempting to degrade and dehumanize black men by making them do their manual labor which requires physical strength. They accidentally distanced their selves from the natural world and made black men stronger physically and emotionally. Thus, white men become "estranged" from any kind of work that requires manual labor. As a consequence, white men are alienated from reality and nature. They have no real "claim to manhood." He adds in an Essay entitled American Sexual Reference: Black Male:

[A] people who lose their self-sufficiency because they depend on their “subjects” to do the world’s work become effeminate and perverted. . . . Do you understand the softness of the white man, the weakness . . . the estrangement from reality? Can you for a second imagine the average middle-class white man able to do somebody harm? Alone? Without the technology that at this moment [allows] him [to] rule the world. (Baraka, 244-245)

Thereby, Baraka managed to pick out one side of slavery and view it positively in favor of black men. This explains his insistence on portraying black men as the toughest men in his literary works and the way he contradicts them with white men whom he refers to as soft and unfit to be the sole representatives of masculinity. In addition to this, Baraka combined his political activism with his literary aesthetic, thereby when promoting the hyper-masculinity of black men, Baraka was actually engaging them in his struggle to end racial discrimination.

## **Reconstructing Black Masculinity**

Bell Hooks adored her grandmother because she was famous for “her snappy and bold tongue” and that’s why she adopted her grandmother’s name as a pen name. Hooks exhibits the theme of her essay by talking about her childhood, specifically her brother.

When she was a child within the confines of her black community, she saw that people expected men to conform to an ideal masculine attitude which was comprised of aggressiveness, quickness to anger, and what she called “phallocentrism”. Her brother contrasted this pervasive stereotype, for he was caring, loving, and giving, like some other men she encountered.

Traditionally, in black communities when one asks a full-grown man to act like a man, he is inciting him to adapt to a masculine ideal rooted in a patriarchal mindset. She argues that this kind of “masculine ideal” is the product of a white supremacist culture. She believes that many black men are not like this at all. Hooks states that the stereotypical image of black men's masculinity as “lazy and shiftless” (Hooks,134) is due to outdated racist representations. These racist stereotypes are an effective method for a white racist to eliminate the importance of black men's labor from the consciousness of the public. Furthermore, Hooks argues

that assimilation has promoted an overall climate where the majority of black females and males undertake sexist presumptions of gender roles from white people. She is not going against the notion of integration, but back in the days when black communities were under segregation, gender roles were complicated and many black men had no problem living in circumstances in which women earn more money. Hooks hopes that black men would overcome what they inherited from being exposed to white patriarchy and the way they viewed masculinity. In a nutshell, she believes that black communities must stop imitating white gender roles and cease regarding them as a norm.

Instead, when we focus our attention on black men who stand up to sexism, and who are unfaithful to the patriarchal frame of mind even if they are a minority, Hooks declares that the likelihood of change is guaranteed. In turn, Hooks discusses many writers in this article who argue the opposite of this last point, they believe that the only way to combat oppression is to elevate the hyper-masculine status of men of color and correspondingly discourage black women from their involvement with feminism because this will be viewed as a treachery to the race. She adds that famous black men like Eddie Murphy who is the kind of person, some of

these writers celebrate represent women in misogynistic terms. Hooks points out that in one of Murphy's performance movies women were portrayed as wicked, or immoral, and their sexuality was seen as merely a commodity that could be traded for hard cash. Accordingly, there is no good reason that obliges black men to listen to such people or to assume they have any knowledge over them. Hooks states that because of this struggle, most black men are in a state of total denial, for they refuse to recognize the pain in their lives which has brought about sexist thinking, and it also causes black men to fight among themselves.

Finally, Hooks notices that Rap Music, videos, and movies glorify and honor images of phallocentric black masculinity. These representations are brought forth when white supremacists try to get acceptance for attacking black men. She maintains that misogyny will only cease to exist as a norm in black communities when black men collectively dare to combat sexism. She invites black men to assume responsibility for their personal growth, give up phallocentric, and envision new ways to think about black masculinity.

## **A Poem for Black Hearts**

Baraka wrote the poem to eulogize Malcolm X, the African American militant civil rights movement leader after his assassination in 1965.

This poem epitomizes the association between African American masculinity with the political activism of African American activists. Baraka raises Malcolm X to the status of “ black god of our time” and “ prince of earth” and dedicates the poem to build an image of him as an icon of masculinity while urging black men to avenge his death if they want to elevate their masculinity in his image.

Written in free verse, the poem consists of 27 Lines. Baraka fragments Malcolm's body and dedicates each part of his poem to that part as he urges black men to reclaim their dignity by following the example of Malcolm as an iconic figure of black masculinity. On many occasions Baraka declared that one of the consequences of racial oppression is the emasculation of African–American men by their white masters. . In a poem entitled REGGAE OR NOT! Baraka wrote, "our women watched when the crackers cut off our balls/ in the grass, they made the little girls watch/stuffed them in our mouths" (38–40), which refers to the metaphorical and literal emasculation of African–American men by

their white Masters. Baraka stated in an essay entitled American sexual reference: Black male that “The black man is covered with sex smell, gesture, aura...By removing the black man’s organs, his manness, the white man removes the threat of the black man asserting that manness” (Baraka 254–259). This clarifies Baraka’s insistence on promoting the hyper–masculine image of black men in his literary works.

As Bell Hooks stated some black authors saw that the appropriate way to combat the racist assumptions concerning black men and their emasculation is by showcasing black men as fearsome hyper–masculine figures in their writing. Apparently, Amiri Baraka belongs to this group of authors, and this poem depicts his obsession with encouraging black men to be hyper–masculine. The poet breaks apart Malcolm’s body and image to stress the significance of each of them. Additionally, Baraka employs enjambment from one line in the poem to the next along with irregular punctuation and repetition to bring the reader’s attention to the idea the poet wants to convey. The poet begins his poem by dedicating it “for Malcolm’s eyes” as follows:

For Malcolm's eyes, when they broke the face of some dumb white man, For Malcolm's hands raised to bless us all black and strong in his image fire darts, the victor's tireless thrusts, words hung above the world change as it may, he said it, and for this he was killed, for saying, and feeling, and being/ change, all collected hot in his heart, According to the poet, Malcolm's eyes are so sharp and piercing that they can smash the face of "some dumb white man" by standing up to their false claims and remaining assertive to expose their bigotry.

Secondly, the poem is dedicated to Malcolm's hands which the poet believes to bless all black people to be strong "in his image", the phrase has a biblical allusion that reciprocates Baraka's later reference to Malcolm as a "black god". Furthermore, the poem is for Malcolm's words, the poet carefully crafts the way he describes them as "fire darts" to show the influence of his speech that incorporates the war rhetoric on his enemies. Baraka believes that his fearless words that called for change and put an end to racial injustice were the reason behind his assassination. The poem is also for "Malcolm's/heart", the heart that loved his fellow black people and his stride to defend their dignity against "the grey monsters of the world " which is a reference to racist whites. After



dedicating the poem to fragments of Malcolm’s body and essence, the speaker affirms that the poem is “For all of him dead and/gone”. Even though Malcolm died, the speaker urges black men to cling to his memory by reviving his words and ideas and integrating them into their lives by taking him as a role model of black masculinity. The speaker sees him as the “black god of our time”

For all of him, and all of yourself, look up,  
black man, quit stuttering and shuffling, look up,  
black man, quit whining and stooping, for all of him,  
For Great Malcolm a prince of the earth, let nothing in us rest  
until we avenge ourselves for his death, stupid animals  
that killed him, let us never breathe a pure breath if  
we fail, and white men call us faggots till the end of  
the earth.

In the final part of the poem, the speaker addresses his targeted audience directly. He attempts to stir up their sense of pride by ordering black men to quit “stuttering and shuffling” and “whining and stooping”. Since according to the speaker, these traits are unmanly. Instead, he orders them to “look up” and act with dignity and pride by taking Malcolm as an example of masculine pride

and struggle for Freedom. Finally, he vows vengeance for the killing of Malcolm X by the “stupid animals that killed him”. He instigates all black men to “never breathe a pure breath” if they fail to avenge his death, and white men will rightly call them “faggots”, the enemy of masculinity in the poet’s eyes and the worst insult to a black man.

### **Conclusion:**

The socially constructed idea of manhood deprives men of expressing their emotions. Especially black men, as they are expected to fit into a racist stereotype that is fetishized and celebrated in today’s popular culture and in non-official contexts whereas this image is condemned elsewhere. Bell hooks invites black men to free themselves from the patriarchal ideas of manhood since according to her, they are the product of the white mainstream mentality. In addition, she acknowledges that some black writers adopted a hyper-masculine persona in their writing because they believe that it is the only way to fight oppression. The analysis of Amiri Baraka’s poem “A poem for black hearts” shows that Baraka pushes a narrative of a hyper-masculine black persona in his poem and encourages black men to be manly following the icon of black masculinity embodied in Malcolm X.

## References:

- Baraka, A. (1965). American Sexual Reference: Black Male. In Home: Social Essays (pp. 243–263). Consortium Book Sales & Dist.
- Baraka, A. (2015). SOS: Poems 1961–2013. Open Road+ Grove/Atlantic.
- Benson, J. (2014). Hypermasculinities in the Contemporary Novel: Cormac McCarthy, Toni Morrison, and James Baldwin. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Cleaver, E., & Geismar, M. (1968). Soul on ice (p. 208). New York: Dell.
- Collins, P. H. (2004). Black sexual politics: African Americans, gender, and the new racism. Routledge.
- Hooks, Bell (2004). We real cool: black men and masculinity. New York: Routledge. p. 29.
- Hooks, B. (1992). Reconstructing Black Masculinity. Black Looks: Race and Representation, 130–157.
- Jordan Jr, W. L. (2013). Emerging Black Masculinities in Hip Hop. Lehigh University.
- Kelley, R. D. (2020). Kickin'Reality, Kickin'Ballistics: "Gangsta Rap" and postindustrial Los Angeles. In Crime, inequality and the state (pp. 84–91). Routledge.

Matlon, J. (2019). Black Masculinity Under Racial Capitalism. The Boston Review.

Rome, D. (2004). Black demons: The media's depiction of the African American male criminal stereotype. Penn State Press.

