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# Postmodern Resistance and Sacred Language in Amiri Baraka's "Ka'ba"

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**Abstract:** This article investigates "Ka'ba" by Amiri Baraka through a postmodern theoretical framework, emphasizing fragmented subjectivity, the destabilization of physical and symbolic space, and the reconstitution of sacred language as a form of cultural resistance. Drawing on Jean-François Lyotard's critique of grand narratives, Jacques Derrida's theory of *différance*, and postcolonial approaches to identity and cultural memory, the study argues that "Ka'ba" functions as a postmodern poetic manifesto of Black consciousness. The poem dismantles Enlightenment rationalism and linear historiography while reconstructing collective identity through African memory, orality, and performative linguistic rituals. The findings demonstrate that Baraka's postmodernism is not nihilistic but regenerative, fusing aesthetic experimentation with political and spiritual urgency.

**Keys words:** postmodernism, Black Arts Movement, sacred language, collective identity, African American poetry

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## INTRODUCTION

Postmodern literary theory is fundamentally characterized by skepticism toward universal truths, stable meanings, and authoritative narratives. Jean-François Lyotard famously defines postmodernism as "incredulity toward meta-narratives," signaling a collapse of totalizing explanations of history, identity, and knowledge (Lyotard, 1984). Within African American literature, however, postmodernism assumes a distinct function. Rather than merely deconstructing meaning, it becomes a strategy for cultural survival, resistance, and re-imagining in response to historical marginalization.

Amiri Baraka's "*Ka'ba*" emerges at the intersection of postmodern aesthetics and the political urgency of the Black Arts Movement. The poem confronts racial oppression while rejecting Western epistemological frameworks that have historically excluded Black experience. Instead of presenting a linear narrative of liberation, "*Ka'ba*" employs fragmentation, symbolic displacement, ritualized language, and collective voice to articulate a fluid and resistant Black identity. This article aims to demonstrate that "*Ka'ba*" exemplifies postmodern resistance by destabilizing dominant narratives and reclaiming sacred language as a transformative cultural force.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative textual analysis grounded in postmodern literary theory and postcolonial criticism. The analysis integrates Lyotard's critique of meta-narratives, Derrida's deconstructive approach to meaning, and postcolonial theories of cultural memory and identity reconstruction. Close reading serves as the primary method, allowing for detailed examination of imagery, pronoun usage, spatial metaphors, and linguistic rhythm.

Rather than seeking a definitive interpretation, the methodology embraces interpretive multiplicity. This approach aligns with postmodern epistemology, which views meaning as contingent, deferred, and contextually produced. Excerpts from the poem are treated as semiotic sites where identity and resistance are continuously negotiated through language.

## RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

One of the most significant postmodern features of "*Ka'ba*" is its rejection of the individualized lyrical subject. The poem consistently replaces the singular "I" with the collective "we," as in the declaration, "*We are beautiful people / With African imaginations.*" This collective articulation disrupts the modernist ideal of the autonomous, self-contained subject and instead presents identity as communal, historical, and relational.

From a postmodern perspective, subjectivity is not fixed but produced through discourse and social context. Derrida's assertion that identity is always deferred and constituted through difference is reflected in Baraka's plural voice. The collective "we" encompasses multiple temporalities, including ancestral past, lived present, and imagined future. This fragmentation does not weaken the subject; rather, it resists assimilation into dominant Western identity frameworks that privilege individuality over community.

Furthermore, the collective voice functions as a political act. By speaking as "we," the poem denies the reader the comfort of detachment. The audience is confronted with a shared historical consciousness that refuses erasure or marginalization. In this sense, the poem embodies postmodern resistance through its very grammar.

Baraka's poem actively destabilizes conventional representations of physical space. The opening image of "*a closed window*" overlooking "*a dirty courtyard*" initially suggests confinement, surveillance, and urban decay. However, this realistic setting is quickly disrupted by the assertion that Black people "*walk across / defying physics in the stream of their will.*"

This moment constitutes a radical rejection of Enlightenment rationality, which privileges empirical laws as universal truths. Lyotard's critique of scientific meta-narratives is particularly relevant here, as Baraka replaces physical determinism with imaginative transcendence. Space in "*Ka'ba*" is not neutral or objective; it is politically charged and symbolically unstable.

The act of "walking across air" signifies the power of imagination to exceed material constraints. This metaphor transforms oppression into a site of creative resistance, aligning with postmodern notions of reality as constructed rather than given. The poem thus redefines freedom not as physical mobility alone but as epistemological and spiritual autonomy.

The line "*Our world is full of sound*" foregrounds orality as a defining feature of Black existence. Sound, in this context, functions as both cultural memory and political resistance. Screaming, calling, and chanting disrupt imposed silence and assert presence in a world structured by exclusion.

Postmodern theory emphasizes the performative nature of language, and Baraka's poem exemplifies this principle. Language in "*Ka'ba*" does not merely describe reality; it actively reshapes it. The poem's rhythmic cadence resembles ritual chants rather than conventional lyric poetry, challenging Western literary hierarchies that privilege written form and formal restraint.

By rejecting standardized poetic structures, Baraka collapses the boundary between art and ritual. This stylistic choice aligns with postmodern challenges to canonical authority and reinforces the idea that meaning emerges through performance and collective participation rather than textual permanence.

The invocation of African imagery "*masks and dances and swelling chants*" operates as a form of postcolonial intertextuality. Africa appears not as a geographically specific homeland but as a symbolic repository of cultural memory and ancestral knowledge. This strategy counters colonial historiography, which has historically erased or distorted African heritage.

However, Baraka's engagement with Africa avoids romanticization. The juxtaposition of African vitality with images of "*gray chains*" and "*winters*" underscores the disjunction between ancestral memory and contemporary displacement. Postmodernism embraces this contradiction by allowing multiple temporal and symbolic realities to coexist without resolution.

This tension reflects postcolonial theory's emphasis on hybridity and fractured identity. The poem does not seek to return to a pure origin but to reassemble identity through memory, imagination, and resistance.

The declaration "*We have been captured*" situates the poem within a historical continuum of enslavement, colonial domination, and systemic racism. Yet Baraka reframes liberation as a semiotic rather than purely physical process. The act of escape occurs through what the poem describes as "*correspondence with ourselves.*"

This notion aligns with Derrida's concept of *différance*, wherein meaning is never fixed but continually deferred and reconstructed. Escape in "*Ka'ba*" involves re-signifying identity through language and imagery. Labor, therefore, becomes both physical and linguistic, as the act of writing, chanting, and imagining constitutes resistance.

The poem suggests that freedom cannot be achieved solely through material change; it requires a transformation of consciousness and symbolic representation. This position reflects postmodern skepticism toward purely structural solutions to oppression.

The poem concludes with the question "*What will be / the sacred word?*" This unresolved inquiry introduces a metafictional dimension that draws attention to the poem's own linguistic limits. Rather than providing closure, Baraka leaves the question open, emphasizing process over resolution.

Postmodern literature frequently resists definitive endings, and this refusal of closure underscores the instability of meaning. The "sacred word" is not a static signifier but an evolving expression shaped by collective experience and historical necessity. Language is presented as both destructive and creative, capable of dismantling oppressive narratives while generating new forms of identity.

## DISCUSSION

The analysis of "*Ka'ba*" demonstrates that Amiri Baraka's poetic practice embodies a form of postmodernism that diverges significantly from its Euro-American theoretical origins. While Western postmodernism is frequently associated with irony, playfulness, and epistemological relativism, Baraka's work mobilizes postmodern techniques in the service of historical recovery, cultural resistance, and spiritual regeneration. In this sense, "*Ka'ba*" exemplifies what may be described as a politically engaged or decolonial postmodernism, one that does not abandon meaning but actively reconstructs it from marginalized epistemological positions.

One of the most significant implications of this study is the reconfiguration of postmodern subjectivity. The collective "we" articulated throughout the poem challenges both modernist individualism and postmodern notions of radical subject dissolution. Rather than erasing subjectivity, Baraka redefines it as communal, historically embedded, and ethically accountable. This collective identity resists the atomization often associated with late capitalist culture and asserts a shared consciousness rooted in lived experience and cultural memory. Such a model complicates Derrida's emphasis on endless deferral by grounding *différance* within a collective historical struggle rather than abstract textual play.

Furthermore, the poem's treatment of space and physical reality invites reconsideration of postmodern spatial theory. By depicting Black bodies that "walk across" air and defy physical laws, Baraka does not merely destabilize realism but actively reclaims imagination as a political faculty. This spatial transgression reflects what postcolonial theorists describe as epistemic disobedience, the refusal to accept Western rationality as the sole arbiter of truth. In "*Ka'ba*," space becomes a contested semiotic field where domination and resistance coexist, and where imagination operates as a counter-hegemonic force. This challenges the assumption that postmodern skepticism necessarily leads to political paralysis.

The poem's emphasis on sound, orality, and ritual further complicates dominant postmodern linguistic theory. While postmodernism often foregrounds the instability of language, Baraka insists on its material and performative power. Language in "*Ka'ba*" is not merely a system of signs but a lived practice capable of sustaining community and generating transformation. This performative dimension aligns with African diasporic traditions in which language functions as invocation rather than representation. Consequently, the poem resists the postmodern tendency toward linguistic nihilism by restoring faith in language as an instrument of survival and renewal.

Another critical implication concerns the poem's engagement with cultural memory and temporality. The interweaving of African ancestral imagery with contemporary scenes of captivity produces a nonlinear temporal structure that resists both nostalgia and progressivist historiography. Rather than seeking a return to a mythic past, Baraka constructs what can be understood as a postmodern palimpsest, where past, present, and future coexist in tension. This temporal multiplicity aligns with Lyotard's critique of linear historical narratives while simultaneously affirming the necessity of historical consciousness for political agency. In this regard, "*Ka'ba*" demonstrates that postmodernism need not entail historical amnesia.

The concept of escape articulated in the poem further underscores Baraka's distinctive postmodern politics. Liberation is not framed as a singular revolutionary event but as an ongoing semiotic process involving re-signification, correspondence, and collective imagination. This understanding resonates with postcolonial critiques of purely structural approaches to emancipation, suggesting that freedom must be enacted at the level of meaning as well as material conditions. Baraka's emphasis on "correspondence with ourselves" foregrounds internal transformation as a prerequisite for external change, complicating simplistic binaries between cultural and political resistance.

Perhaps the most theoretically productive aspect of the poem lies in its concluding question concerning the "sacred word." This open-ended inquiry encapsulates the poem's postmodern refusal of closure while simultaneously affirming the necessity of meaning-making. The sacred word is not revealed because it cannot be fixed; it must remain responsive to historical circumstance and collective need. This position challenges postmodern relativism by suggesting that meaning, though unstable, remains ethically urgent. Language, in Baraka's vision, is both fragile and powerful—capable of destruction, but also indispensable for creation.

Taken together, these findings suggest that "*Ka'ba*" offers a corrective to dominant interpretations of postmodernism as politically disengaged or culturally detached. Baraka's poem demonstrates that postmodern techniques—fragmentation, metafiction, deconstruction—can be repurposed to serve emancipatory ends. By integrating postmodern skepticism with Black cultural epistemologies and spiritual imagination, "*Ka'ba*" redefines postmodernism as a mode of resistance grounded in collective memory and ethical responsibility.

In this sense, "*Ka'ba*" occupies a critical position within both African American literary history and global postmodern discourse. It challenges scholars to reconsider the relationship between postmodern aesthetics and political commitment, particularly in contexts shaped by colonial violence and racial oppression. Baraka's poem ultimately suggests that postmodernism, when re-rooted in marginalized experience, can function not as a discourse of exhaustion, but as a language of survival.

## CONCLUSION

Amiri Baraka's "*Ka'ba*" stands as a seminal example of postmodern African American poetry that transcends aesthetic experimentation to become an act of cultural reclamation. Through fragmented subjectivity, deconstructed spatial logic, intertextual African memory, and metafictional inquiry, the poem transforms language into a sacred and political force.

Ultimately, "*Ka'ba*" invites readers into an ongoing process of meaning-making, where the search for the "sacred word" remains open, collective, and historically grounded. In doing so, the poem affirms postmodernism not as nihilism but as a strategy of survival and renewal.

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