



Renegotiation of Black Identity: A Study of James Baldwin's Essays in Postmodern Context

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ABSTRACT

The proposed research paper will focus on black identity, race and racism in the select essays of James Baldwin. The study will rest in the basic understanding of the literature produced by Black writers in postmodern context. The American society employs literary imagination as a mode to represent and understand the lives of Afro-Americans in white dominated society. Postmodernism is characterized by its metanarratives like Marxism, religion, fragmentation, fluidity and fixed selves. Postmodernity has attempted to reshape the political, cultural and economic structures globally. The objective of the paper is to examine the treatment given to the Blacks which lead them to identity crises and racial discrimination. For the purpose of the study two essays written by Baldwin have been selected. These essays deal with varied themes like identity, race, segregation, equality, sexuality, the American dream and the coming of age.

Introduction:

James Arthur Baldwin (1923-1987) is a prolific writer and has been celebrated as a novelist, essayist, playwright, scriptwriter, director; poet and filmmaker. Though an ambitious novelist and playwright Baldwin has attained the most lasting literary recognition as an essayist. As an essayist Baldwin has been a feted, critically acclaimed and admired writer. The most important facet in Baldwin's writings is that his essays, novels, interviews and their content involve storytelling that is personal and retrospective as well as social and public discourse. There is an intimate connection between the society and his life. The



place of experience is most common aspect used by Baldwin. His essays are regarded as contemporary classics because of their polished style and timeless insights. *Notes of a Native Son* published two years after his first novel *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, received a lot of critical attention. *The Price of the Tickets: Collected Nonfiction*, *I am Not Your Negro*, *The Fire Next Time* and *The Notes of a Native Son* marks a high point in his long productive career as an essayist. The essays of Baldwin are replete with the memory of experiences and contain inescapable memories of his childhood in America. His essays while having eloquence often contain digressions and subthemes and many a time show a disregard for the failure of coherence.

Theoretical Framework

Black identity has always been recognized in relation to white majority. The paper has been contextualized according to postmodern theory as tool to deconstruct racial frame work. The paper will mainly explore the issues of identity and racial discrimination faced by blacks. The critical race theory and self-reflexive methodology has been used to synthesize black literature and the theories associated with it. The literature written by Baldwin shows his struggle and highlights his hard experiences as a victim of racism in America.

Race and Racism

The notion of race and racism is not confined to modern times. The race has its roots in ancient history and civilizations also. Race and racism were enforced even when no science of biology and anthropology made the justification for discrimination. According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* racism is, "the unfair treatment of people who belong to a different race; violent behaviour towards them and the belief that some races of people are better than others". Racism is a term with different connotations. It is referred to as a social construct. Besides, it also refers to, individual, structural, personal, legal, scientific, cultural and myths of racial superiority.

It is very difficult to define the term racism. There is no universally accepted definition of racism. Racism is a process where an individual is oppressed by policies, actions, attitudes created to discriminate and oppress the people based on a particular race. Racism is viewed as an institutional matter based on a system in which the white majority raises its social position by exploiting, controlling and keeping down others who are categorized in racial and ethnic terms. Moreover, racism is a system of beliefs and ideologies operating at different levels such as personal, cultural, social, structural, and scientific. Racism



has given birth to various evils including slavery, holocaust, colonization, Jim Crow laws and apartheid in different parts of globe.

Baldwin: A victim of Racism

James Baldwin is a prolific writer of African American descent. Baldwin has dismantled various racial, cultural, social and sexual myths prevailing in America. Baldwin in his essay titled the *Dark Days* talks about his experience in America. Besides, the essay will also reflect on the purpose of education. Baldwin in his essay titled *Dark Days* dwells on his hard experiences as a victim of racism in America and his hardships as child in his own family. Referring to racism and dichotomy of the white and black in America Baldwin says, “to be black was to confront, and to be forced to alter, a condition forged in history. To be white was to be forced to digest a delusion called white supremacy”.

Baldwin started his schooling in Harlem. Baldwin begins it as everyone does with the people who want to over power and outwit him and were responsible for his formation. He was loved by the whites in their own way and he loved them in his fashion. In the similar context Baldwin in the essay *Dark Days* says, “they were the people whom I had no choice but to imitate and, in time, to outwit. One realizes later that there is no one to outwit but oneself. Baldwin asserts that education occurs in a context and has a very definitive purpose to serve. The context is mainly unspoken and the purpose is very often unspeakable. But education can never be aimless and it cannot occur in a vacuum”.

Eulogy to Baldwin

Toni Morrison is a central literary figure in canonical American literature. She is the first black Nobel laureate of African American descent. Morrison has been greatly influence by the writings of James Baldwin. In her eulogy paid to Baldwin titled *James Baldwin’s Eulogy*, she paid a rich tribute to him and his gift of art. Morrison says, “no one possessed or inhibited language for me the way you did. You made American English honest-genuinely international. You exposed its secrets and reshaped it until it was truly modern, dialogic, representative and humane. You stripped it out of ease (Morrison)”.

Research Gap

The question of race obviously is at one and the same time invoked in debates in relation to other important issues such as language, epistemology, cognition and evolutionary theories of science. Frank Kirkland makes a very important assertion when he says: “The modern tradition stages a productive debate between the affirmation of individual versus the affirmation of groups, and continues to provide



resources for ongoing philosophical work on the questions of oppression” (*Philosophy* 18). American history has been a combination of various social, cultural and historical aspects like race, racism, slavery, prejudice, and inequality. Race as a concept has always been a dominant discourse since the times of slavery from Africa to different parts of America. The major issues like race, sexuality, class and gender have been emerged as hotspots of the cultural criticism in American educational institutions. Up to 1990s, it has been clearly made visible that no systematic investigation in American literature, music and art can ignore the race as a prevalent idea. Diangelo in similar context says, “racism is so American that when we protest racism, some assume that we are protesting America” (xi). It can be argued that there is hardly an issue more contested than the issue of race particularly in the literature of African American writers. Despite, a comprehensive research in the black literature there are certain research gaps to be bridged.

Color line and Twentieth Century

The earliest American life was assessed through the scientific race theories. The scientific basis of race has an absolute and unshakable belief in white supremacy. The proposed research paper has been an attempt to dwell on the racism in general and Baldwin as a victim of racism in America. The time period after Second World War is considered as golden era in the interests of race. W. E. B. Du Bois is a prominent American writer, sociologist and a civil right activist of the first half of twentieth century. Bois has a prominent place in the history of African American literature. Du Bois in his essay titled *The Souls of Black Folk* talks about the racial identity, equality, color line and double consciousness. It is a fundamental text which traces the history of African American literature and the post slavery experiences of blacks. The epigraph of the essay has been borrowed from a poem titled *The Crying of Water* written by a Welsh poet Arthur Symons. The epigraph of the poem reads, “of our spiritual strivings, o water, voice of my heart, crying in the sand, all night long crying with a mournful cry, as I lie and listen, and cannot understand. The voice of my heart in my side or the voice of the sea” (4). The epigraph of the poem describes the persistent longing and striving of blacks for equality and identity. Besides, it also urges the world to listen to mournful cries of blacks symbolizing their struggle for understanding as being. Du Bois draws an unconventional analogy by comparing the unresting water of the sea and the hearts of blacks. According to Du Bois both will always be weary, wonder and cry for life long without rest. Moreover, the epigraph consists of the various rhetorical questions associated with racial division and existence of the blacks in America. According to Du Bois the problem of twentieth century is the problem of color line. Color based racism is most prevalent form of racism in America. Baldwin refers to the American situation as very peculiar in the world. Referring to the color as protective shield to



Americans Baldwin in his essay titled *Dark Days* says, “no curtain under heaven is heavier than the curtain of guilt and lies behind which Americans hide. The curtain may prove to be yet more deadly to the lives of human beings than that iron curtain of which we speak so much, and know little. The American curtain of is color” (Baldwin 46). Moreover, Baldwin refers to color as a conundrum to American of which they cannot make an escape. Baldwin in the essay titled *Notes of a Native Son* says, “the conundrum of color is the inheritance of every American, be he/she legally or actually black or white” (xiv). As already mentioned in the above paragraph during the first half of the 1990s, the most widely recognized area of the debate was race among the American scholars and critics. By referring to racism after 1990s Morrison in her book *Mouth Full of Blood* says, “in 1995 racism may wear a new dress, buy a new pair of boots, but neither its succubus sister fascism is new or can make anything new. It can only reproduce the environment that supports its own health: fear, denial, and an atmosphere in which its victim have lost the will to fight” (Morrison 15).

James Baldwin’s essays critique the imbalances of race and racism. Baldwin uses ‘rock’ as metaphor in his essay titled *Notes of a Native Son* to describe the brutal effects of racism and hatred towards blacks. Baldwin insists his fellowmen to challenge and claim racism. Otherwise, the it will claim us. Referring to rock Baldwin says, “ lead me to the rock that is higher than and I, hide me in the rock, I got a home in the rock, I ran to the rock to hide my face, the rock cried out no hiding place” (Baldwin xiii). Baldwin claims his birth right in America but cannot claim it without accepting racism as the inheritance. Baldwin asserts in his essay *The Stranger in the Village*, “the interracial drama acted out on the American continent has not only created a new black man, it has created a new white man, too”(10). As mentioned above Baldwin was born in Harlem. He has written about his life in Harlem, Atlanta and Paris as well as about important writers and activists such as Richard Wright, Lorraine Hansberry, Martin Luther king, Malcolm X, Jinnie Carter and Norman Mailer. Baldwin in his essay *Dark Days* says, “Harlem was not an all-black community during the time I was growing up. It was only during the second world war that Harlem begin to become entirely black” (6). In the process of examining the contemporary culture he moved into areas such as politics, literature, movies and most importantly into his own self.

Conclusion

Baldwin’s essay critiques the imbalance of race and racism. The proposed research paper has been an attempt to dwell on the racism in general and Baldwin as a victim of racism in America in particular. As mentioned in the paper the twentieth century has been declared as the century of color line in terms of different applications of the racism such as discrimination, prejudice, color, whites and black dichotomy,



equality, sexuality and American dream. There is hardly any issue more contested than the issue of racism.

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