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THE STATUS OF NEGRO WOMEN IN JAMES BALDWIN'S NOVELS

K. MALLESWARA RAO

Selection Grade Lecturer in English, Mahrajah's College (A), Vizianagaram, A.P.

E-mail: malleswararaok@rediffmail.com



K. MALLESWARA RAO

ABSTRACT

Baldwin as novelist emerged on the firmament of American literature with the publication of his first novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. It was an autobiographical novel. His works, specially the fictions, are mainly concerned with major problems of the black world of his time. Racial quest for identity, violence both psychological and physical due to discriminations, alienation, sexual aberrations due to severe depression are mainly given due importance. Baldwin limits the freedom of the women in his first novel. We find women of different moods and psychologies. Like the Negroes of 1800 and 1900, we find women's living in slavery as is viewed by the world in the United States.

Baldwin's fifth novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* deals with some of the positive reactions. The novel is abundant with all Baldwinian feelings and techniques like racial, love, family unity, sex, homosexual, white man's hatred and lust for the blacks, Blackman's psychological violence due to his hidden feelings of hatred and rebellion against the white man, poverty of the blacks financial crisis and economic planning to find justice, flashback narration, all these are found in this novel. A close studies of the above two novels exhibits a slow and steady growth in the women characters. The women characters in the above novels i.e. Florence, Elizabeth, Mrs. Sharon and Tish are the representatives of Black, unlucky and abominable Negro Women. But a close observation of these two novels shows a peculiar growth in their mind-set and their attitude.

A close examination of the women characters in the two novels gives us a broad idea that Baldwin has envisaged a stride towards freedom for the blacks for which the first step is the freedom both physical and psychological for women without whom the society is nothing. The flashes of revolt in the women characters of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* become flood of revolt and fight against the racial discrimination in America. In a male dominated society, Baldwin thinks, women have a role, a positive and important role if they want to enjoy freedom in the true sense. He gives a literary shape to his ideas in these two novels. He tries to make his dream, a dream in which a free society of America rid of discriminations like black or white or men or women, a reality in the novels.

INTRODUCTION

The cultural history of American Negro can broadly be demarcated into two periods, the period

beginning with folk art before the Emancipation and the period beginning from 1890. The period between Emancipation and 1890 was the gestation

period for the Negro novelists. During this period, important events took place in the Negro World of America as the rise of the middle class, different from the mass of freedom by virtue of its superior educational and economic attainment. This middle class developed its own ideology, modeled after the 'respectable whites', acquired its own grievances, different from those of slavery. By 1890, this Negro middle class could produce several spokesmen, trying their hand in the art of fiction. But the historical background of this new Negro Middle Class divided the Negro into two classes. The privileged mulattoes, who were the illegitimate offspring of a white man and a Negro slave woman and the slaves. In course of time, these mulattoes considered themselves as privileged 'Coloured Class' among the blacks and were relatively free with a better destiny for their children than the workers of cotton fields and lash's from the overseers. These 'coloured' public naturally had a relief from the arduous duties of darker field hands and were employed as house servants in the white aristocracy. This threatened the very institute of slavery in the South.

This privileged 'Colored Class' formed the nucleus of the Negro Middle Class. This Negro middle class was called as Talented Tenth by W.E.B. Du Bois. Slowly this Talented Tenth could attain the status of small proprietors, white-collar workers and independent professionals in the spheres of economy. They also involved in the service of Negro masses. This gradual achievement in the fields of economy and education made them to turn to literature for expressing their ideology of success. They turned to fiction writing which was nothing but their journey up from slavery. Before the abolition of slavery, the coloured population was subjected to segregation in housing and travel, discriminating in employment and exclusion from places of public accommodation. But emancipation caused economic and social revolution in South. It wrecked the plantation economy. The master-slave relation was severed between the races and the supremacy of the masters of the slave market was thrown to dust. Naturally all these social changes found their place in the fiction of the 19th century.

Hectic industrialization made the Negro to shift from the farm plantations to urban proliferations. The coloured population migrated from South to North, from country to city. Immigration was made convenient by the Immigration Laws of 1924. This migration was encouraged by the expansion of American industry, creating labour market for thousands of black workers. Such a large mass of the Negro came and settled in the ghetto of New York. Harlem became the centre of a new movement, in the history of American Arts. Harlem provided the Negro artist an infinite variety of human subjects as well as an opportunity to observe urban life at its maximum intensity. The opening decade of the twentieth century, along with the Great Depression, saw a great surge of black intellectuality in all angles of art taken in its broader sense. Harlem, a party of New York became the black Metropolis, centering the hopes or despairs or assumptions or perceptions or expectations of the black community in the U.S. It represented the militancy, the radical social change of the black community.

In this paper, the investigator would like to share some of his views on the status of women in the first and fifth novels of James Baldwin.

Go Tell IT on The Mountain: Baldwin as a novelist emerged on the firmament of American literature in 1953, with the publication of his first novel *Go Tell I't on the Mountain*. When Baldwin published this novel, the immediate reaction in the press as well as in the reading public was overwhelmingly encouraging. Except one or two critics, almost all the others stormed the novelist with praises.

Brunn, Robert was one of the few to have a slightly negative idea about the novel. He describes the novel "as novel without joy and with little hope of either progress or self-realization for the Harlem Negroes who struggle with poverty, sensualism, each other and white and how they turn to escape the cheerless world". No other Baldwin's works except his essays, received such a positive criticism till date.

Riley Hughes reviewed the novel in *Booklist* as "A story of religious experience among Harlem Negroes. The account of young John's conversion on his fourteenth birth day is set against the story of his

forefathers', told in flashback, covering the lives and sins of three generations".

"This is a distinctive book, both realistic and brutal, but a novel of extraordinary sensibility and poetry" said Roi Ottley.

It was an autobiographical; the main focus of the novel is on the religious conversion of John Grimes. The action of the novel commences in the morning of the protagonist's i.e. John Grime's fourteenth birthday, and before the night is out, the whole inner action and reactions are over and his soul is filled with gladness and he finds himself walking with 'the saint'. The novel is divided into three parts.

Part I

"The Seventh Day" opens wide to us the protagonist and his family and his fears and aspirations are the centre of his life i.e. The Temple of the Fire Baptized. This part introduces to Grimes family in Harlem. The Grimes tenement in Harlem accommodates Gabriel, John's father, Elizabeth, his mother, Roy, his younger brother, Sarah and Ruth, his two younger sisters. John hates the hellish atmosphere of his house. His father is wild, hellish, and repressive and hate suffused. He does not like John because he is his stepchild. His half-brother Roy is Gabriel's most coveted son because he is his true blood. Elizabeth is always silent and is not allowed to open her mouth by her husband. John does not like his father's dual behaviour, his wild behavior in his house and his hell's fire sermons on the altar of the Temple of the Fire Baptized. John is seen struggling mentally, trying to understand the terms sin, guilt, and sex, his parent's indulgence in particular and the Harlem inhabitants in general.

Part II

"The Prayers of the Saint" is titled, renders the background history of the Grimes' family in a flashback narration. It deals with the flashbacks about the thoughts and private histories of his mother Elizabeth, putative father Gabriel and his aunt Florence. It unfolds through the reminiscences of Florence, sister of Gabriel, elder to him at least by ten years. His mother is the oldest woman to her in the world. She had been born innumerable years ago on a plantation, during slavery in one state and

in another plantation she grew up as one of the field-workers. When she was thirty, she lost her husband-but her master had given her another. Florence did not like this. She never liked their life in south. Her heart grew rebellious day by day as her mother considered her brother as the apple of her eye, being a male child. She had an ambition to live like the white.

Gabriel finds twenty years of his past life as a flashback. He marries the bony and unattractive Deborah, his sister's friend and a victim of gang-rape by the whites. But Deborah is barren because her sexuality is damaged permanently by the gang-rape of her youth by the whites. The joyless marriage bed of them makes Gabriel to involve in an affair with Esther, who works for the same white family where he does. When Esther conceives, Gabriel sends her to Chicago by force, giving some money to her, taken from Deborah. But Esther dies in childbirth, giving birth to an unclaimed son to Gabriel and names him 'Royal' before her death.

The final part of this Part II of the novel deals with Elizabeth's flashback. As Esther's or Deborah's or Florence's, her story also is a tragedy though in a different way. Her light-skinned and beautiful mother dies when Elizabeth is eight years. Elizabeth immediately recognizes the disaster of the incident because her mother never showed love or attention on her because Elizabeth was very much darker than her and not so beautiful as she was and soon she had to live with her aunt which is a real disaster because after her mother's death, her father who appears like Elizabeth, dark, gentle and proud, starts running a house of prostitution.

"The Threshing Floor", Part III of the novel sets us on to the present and completes the story with the conversion of John. It takes place on the floor before the altar of the Temple of the Fire Baptized, their church. It is a novel of Great Migration and a novel about the Negro Church, i.e. store front church and a novel about the black ghetto of New York. It emphasizes John's conversion. He is surrounded by Mother Washington, Brother Elisha and other saints. When the prayer is going on, his mind tortured by guilt, fear and hatred for many things he has seen, done and tested. Finally when it is dawn, he emerges out

of the Temple, smiling and confident about his future.

Rachel, Florence's mother is a typical slave. This slavish and insecure circumstances in which she lives, makes her to think about her daughter, Florence. Florence is Johnny's aunt. She enters the church because she is dying. She is terrified every night as it takes her close to death. She identifies her pride as the reason for her fall and comes to the Altar of the Lord praying for her redemption.

Not my father, not my mother,
But it's me, Oh, Lord.

Thus Florence's ambition to have identity ends with a call from the altar. Elizabeth's is a story of love and tragedy. Her hopes to have identity for her Johnny stay blinking. So, her ultimate prayer before the altar of God on the day of John's conversion is

"All things work together for good to them
that love the Lord."

She hears the voice of Richard, and the voice of God. When the others are singing in the church,

Must Jesus bear the cross alone?
And the entire world goes free?

She has the light of the fire, the awaited light in her eyes.

All the major characters of the novel of Negro Renaissance, the violence, the protest, the request for identity and alienation are well knit, while fabricating the novel by the author. All the major issues that took place during the period, i.e. from 1880 to 1940 like the Emancipation, Great Migration find their place in the narration itself. A keen scrutiny of the novel in all respects shows it as a sociopolitical novel. The lives and the hopes of the blacks are shown how they are radically delimited and thrown into unlimited misery by the harsh indictment of the white-controlled society. The basic converging point for all the different themes in the novel is racial discrimination. Their skin colour offers them no better hope or position in the society than the back door, dark stairs or kitchen or basement for their lives and the alternatives for these seem to be escapism through drugs, drinks and sex or through the church. Baldwin limits the freedom of the women in this novel. We find women of different moods and psychologies in this novel.

All most all the characters of the novel taste the bitterness of the white society. Gabriel's mother's narration of the atrocities of the white on the blacks like lynching, auction of the black children, and remarriages of the black women gives a picture of the lives of the blacks in southern plantation before the anti-slavery bill.

If Beale Street Could Talk: Baldwin's fifth novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* was published in 1974 by the Dial Press. Bell, Pearl K. commented that the latest novel of Baldwin.....is his shallowest work of fiction and ironically says that Baldwin commits these very "atrocities of distortion and stereotyping" that he deplored in Richard Wright. In *If Beale Street Could Talk* he tries to capture the "manner of the blues balled" but instead he comes out with an "ethnic soap opera- complete with cardboard characters shoved through pseudo tragic charades of doom and catastrophe".

Broyard Antole in his article "No Color Line in Cliches" criticized the novel as "vehemently sentimental love story": and Baldwin appears so dated in this novel that even Wright is more contemporary".

In the opinion of Delwaiter Robert, "Images of separation and attempted reunion pervade the book. Although Baldwin presents depth of feeling, he was not transcended the clichés of language, theme and place. The novel moves one but does not convince".

Daffy, Martha classified the novel "as a dead line drama" and considered it as a novel "Not a success, being too sentimental and predictable".

Edward Thomas saw the irony in Baldwin's title but contends that the novel "does not succeed in telling a convincing story 'about' black lovers in the repressive hands of white justice". The novel 'goes wrong' because Baldwin does not take the "trouble to get things right". One cannot read the novel as a "social drama" since he has written it so "flatly and schematically" that he drives one "to imagining ways in which the story might be more believable".

These are some of the mixed or rather negative remarks on the novel immediately after its publication. But Baldwin is at the appreciation end by many as he was with his other novels for his

eternal fight against black oppression and racial discrimination by the whites.

The Dial Press, which published the novel in its publisher's note, summarized some of the positive reactions to the novel in the following way:

Tish is a nineteen year old girl in love with Fonny, a sculptor.

She is pregnant, by him, and they have pledged to get married.

But he is falsely accused of raping a Puerto Rican woman and

sent to prison. Both families set out to find evidence that will

free him, a search that takes them throughout New York and

San Juan.

The novel is abundant with all Baldwin's feelings and techniques like racial, love, family unity, sex, homosex, Whiteman's hatred and lust for the blacks, the Blackman's psychological violence due to his hidden feelings of hatred and rebellion against the Whiteman, poverty of the Blacks, financial crisis and economic planning to find justice, flashback narration, all these found in the novel.

The novel is divided into two parts; part one titled as *Troubled in My Soul* and part two as *Lion*. Almost the whole narration of the major events of the novel like the childhood of Tish and Fonny, their love affair, Fonny's arrest, Tish's pregnancy, her determination to have the baby and its father, the endless efforts for the release of Fonny from the jail at least on bail find their place in part one of the novel. The second part of the novel as its title indicates, includes the change in the attitude of Fonny's sisters, the death of Frank, Fonny's father and finally the birth of a baby to Tish, indicating the arrival of a hope into the desolate mind of the two families and a hopeful suggestion of Fonny's release. Like his other novels, Baldwin here also uses the technique of flashback narration: this time the narrator is interestingly a woman unlike his other novels of him. Baldwin depicts the long fight of Climentine, called as 'Tish', a nineteen year old girl from Harlem. Her father was Joseph Rivers, Sharon was her mother and Ernestine was her elder sister. Joseph was a porter in a bus stop in Boston when he married Sharon, a singer from Birmingham.

Before their marriage, both of them came to New York in search of Sharon's uncle, a Whiteman in Wall Street. Though they could not meet him, they got married within a week and settled in Harlem.

Ernestine, Tish's sister was working in a settlement house and knew Mr. Arnold Hayward, a White lawyer through that house. When Fonny was arrested, she suggested Tish to approach Mr. Hayward and requested him to argue for Fonny in the court. Mr. Hayward, a man in his middle thirties was nice even to Negroes, though he was a white. After hearing Fonny's case, Mr. Hayward got the doubt whether Fonny would come out of the prison, because the charge against him was a rape, committed on a white woman. Mrs. Victoria Rogers, a Puerto Rico, was raped in darkness and when police paraded some culprits for identification, she pointed at Fonny. Mr. Hayward could easily guess that the fate of Tish and Fonny was flooded because the charge sheet was strongly worded against Fonny and Mrs. Rogers refused to reconsider her testimony. Moreover, she disappeared from New York.

Apart from the racial, the judiciary and the police, the novel presents love as a symbol of commitment, commitment to morality and commitment to resistance. The love is represented by committed women like Mrs. Sharon and Miss. Ernestine. Other than racial theme, which includes the police and the judiciary, the novel also projects other major and important themes like love, family relations, religions and the women power.

Baldwin presents love and women power as interwoven themes in this novel. We cannot imagine love without women and women without love in this novel. The very purpose of the author is to exhibit the women power with love. He presents love in two forms, love between the young lovers, which is more or less physical and carnal and the love among the family members, which makes them fight with a cause and fight for a cause. While doing so they are united. When Fonny and Tish have spent a night alone in Greenwich village, making love, then itself they had decided to get married and when they have been to Tish's place the next morning. Fonny assures Tish's parents that he wants to marry

her and can give her a good life through his occupation as sculptor.

“Mr.Rivers, please don’t scold Tish. It’s my entire fault, Sir, I kept

her out. I had to talk to her. Please. Mr. Rivers. Please. I asked her to marry me. That’s what we were doing out so long. We want to get married. That’s why I’m here. You’re her father.

You love her. And so I know you know – you have to know –that I love her. I’ve loved her all my life. You know that. And if I didn’t love her, I wouldn’t be standing in this room now –would I? I could have left her on the stoop and run away again. I know you might want to beat me up. But I love her. That’s all I can tell you.

The most important image of black woman hood as we see in the novel is Tish. Tish is the first black woman Baldwin allows to tell her own story. He had never trusted a black woman to relate her own story, or trusted himself enough to dare adopt the pose.

Sylvander comments briefly on Baldwin’s ambivalence about using Tish as a narrator. She quotes Baldwin: “To try to tell story from the point of view of a pregnant woman is something of a hazard. I tried to avoid it, but she’s the only one who can tell the story”.

The women clearly are represented and sharply drawn in opposition to each other. They range from Mrs. Hunt a sanctified aloof, pitiful and as an excuse for a mother to Sharon Rivers, a glorified, long suffering one to her daughter Tish. Images of Sharon and Mrs. Hunt are shaped by their reactions to their children, Tish (Clementine) and Fonny (Alonzo) respectively.

Almost parallel sexual scenes – that between Frank and Mrs. Hunt and that between Fonny and Tish – are used for drastically different purposes in the novel. The two sexual rites parallel the distinction in the two religious characters as best represented by Mrs. Hunt and Sharon Rivers.

The end of the novel indicates a victory in several respects. The success of the black family in thwarting the advance of the sinister social forces, the success of love, the birth of the baby indicating

the release of Fonny, all these positive changes are due to the unity and commitment of the members of the family of Rivers. Baldwin uses time as a symbol of action in the novel. The novel begins with the pregnancy of Tish and closes with the arrival of the baby.

Conclusion

A close and dedicated study of the two novels of Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *If Beale Street Could Talk* exhibit a slow and steady growth in the women characters. All the women, either black or white, become secondary in their roles and existence. Though secondary and non-existent, they attract the special critical attention of the reader with their psychological growth which is in an ascending order. Florence and Elizabeth in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Tish in *If Beale Street Could Talk* need a special attention when we talk about Baldwin’s women characters. They have many roles to play, sometimes one overlapping the other.

The women as I observe in the two novels, Florence, Elizabeth, Mrs.Sharon and Tish are representatives of Black women, the unlucky, abominable Negro women. But they show a peculiar growth in their mind-set and their attitude. Thus *Go Tell It on the Mountain* presents women of all categories, a mother, an aunt, a wife a fallen women etc. All the women in the novel had no chance of revolting against the society or the racial discrimination or struggle against the circumstances to improve their fate or to get justice. *If Beale Street Could Talk*, as we have already observed, is the novel of Baldwin where we find women playing a vital role, so to say the major role. Baldwin projects the black women as confident and courageous to fight against the committed system in the Government, the judiciary and the police, for whom justice means only for the whites and punishment means only for the blacks. Unlike in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, the women in this novel are not tied down by the notions of guilt and morality and are flexible.

Thus the women in these two novels give us a broad idea that Baldwin has envisaged a stride towards freedom for the blacks for whom the first step is the freedom both, physical and psychological for women without whom the society is nothing.

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