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A PASSEL OF CONCERNS IN CERTAIN TEXTS BY JAMES BALDWIN: FICTIONAL REFLECTIONS

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Abstract

Going into the sagacity of James Baldwin's fictional texts, the paper studies some of his works in the context of Contemporary Black Literature and the perplexity of how his works send-off tendrils of perceptions to this magnanimous body of growing literature. Baldwin's works reflected in the complexity of this study are Just above My Head, If Beale Street Could Talk, and Another Country. It delves into the experience of the African American in a context of police contention, fright and terror, intermingled with cumbersome dimensions of identity as a community and the identity of the self. The paper looks into the thematic mirroring of the African American identity in the amusing backdrop of his contribution to the bricked and layered nuances of the African American literary tradition. In the layered nature of Baldwin's fictional kaleidoscope, the paper studies his individuality, which stems from the fiercely singular nature of his writing style when he expresses his protagonists' experiences. In the meandering routes away from taking Baldwin as a distinct token lies his irresistible stance of being a fierce witness with words in fiction. These myriad concerns are explored in the paper.

**Keywords:** African American Identity, Stereotypical beauty, white Americans, racism, African American Community.

Introduction

James Baldwin as a creator held so much prowess and finesse in the literary context of his times, polemically as an activist as well. The intrigue of his relevancy lies in how his literature transcends those times to animate political nuances and movements, holding sway over the ideology that permeates the current times. With such transcending capacity, the paper delves into his fictional reflections.

Perhaps when Leemings first began his biographical piece on James Baldwin, it seemed just as daunting even when he finished it. In his preface and acknowledgement to *James Baldwin: A Biography*, he describes Baldwin as "highly complex, troubled, and driven individual who was more intensely serious than anyone I had ever met." (Loc 93) Although simply peering in, it may seem like a reductive and redundant way of describing anyone, the fact that they would share so many messages in letters and meetings resulting in this book makes

one wonder that perhaps Baldwin would always be an enigma to all who meet him even years later through his writings. Reflecting on how Leemings would describe this man, it almost seems fitting that his fictional reports would contain the same kind of complexity haunted by troubling abstract ideas and notions that will never indeed be tangible to the human thought in its purest sense. As we peel the layers of his fictional works succoured by his other writings, perhaps we can attain some piece of the mosaic he has carefully left in a legacy of writings. The plethora of his writings is plenty and saturates his legacy fully as a writer. However, the probing shall be limited to *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Just Above My Head* for our study. Regardless, the probe shall permeate into his other writings, focusing primarily on the novels mentioned earlier.

#### Discussion

The question of the African American identity is never polemic in Baldwin's novels. Perhaps he used his non-fictional writings for a heavier hand at critiquing and scrutinizing. Still, in the context of his novels, he always has a story or stories to tell, narratives to weave, so that the reader is often left with a work that causes an intense level of empathy to engage with the characters and feel what it feels like to have an identity with a heritage of racism rooted so deep within its system. *If Beale Street Could Talk* is such a novel that engages the reader into this realm of empathy through its characters like Fonny and Clementine. The question of this identity is explored in a narrative that causes pathos and a silent kind of enagement that seems to be a part of this African American identity. This element of sorrow and pathos is seen through the words of Clementine when she thinks of the baby, she is going to have with Fonny:

Can you imagine what anybody on this bus would say? What would *you* say? I can't say, I'm going to have this baby and I'm scared, too, and I don't want anything to happen to my baby's father, don't let him die in prison, oh, please! You can't say that. That means you can't really say anything. Trouble means you're alone. (8)

One can easily sense the pathos in this excerpt. But lying beyond the initial shock of pathos comes a sense of empathy that engages the reader; consequently, after this, one senses a feeling of hostility when she ends with, "Trouble means you're alone", mingled with pity. The layering of emotions that the excerpt or novel invokes is the same kind of layering that we have when we talk about the identity of the African American. Perhaps no matter how much we dissect and analyze, the essence of it will keep evading closed boundaries and definitions. Similarly, in *Just Above My Head*, we see the same kind of intermingled process when it comes to the character of Hall when he recalls his brother's tragic death:

He had been found lying in a pool of blood – why does one say pool? – a storm, a violence, a miracle of blood: his blood, my brother's blood, my brother's blood, my brother's blood! (4)

Once again, just like Clementine's trail of thoughts in *If Beale Street Could Talk*, we see Hall from an invoked state of empathy that gives in to reveal the character's silent enagement after the initial sense of pathos. Again, therefore, an element or dimension seen in both these works is a strain of the African American identity, dealt from an aspect of a narrative given in a fictional work that invokes empathy to reveal further the other senses and emotions underlying the surface reaction.

Another intriguing element related to this quest or exploration of identity is how the characters tend to go on the trail of thoughts. If left to wander, the studies reveal a dimension of themselves that identifies with the strangest things. For example, in *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Clementine imagines herself as a zebra for the external eye peering in. Although she does end this trail with a thought-provoking statement, the image of the zebra tends to reveal her idea of the self as an alienated, muted thing – "They looked at us as though we were zebras – and, you know, some people like zebras and some people don't. But nobody ever asks the zebra." (9) The idea of the self is always a critical strain to look at while analyzing the identity of any individual or community. This intriguing excerpt reveals the kind

of animal that Clementine imagines herself to be whilst lost in a series of thoughts.

Similarly, in *Just Above My Head*, Hall, while narrating a piece of his history involving his brother's death, his trail of thoughts land on the image of the telephone and how, for a brief moment, he compares himself to the black one – "I looked at the marvel of human effort, the telephone. The telephone beside my bed was black – like me, I think I thought, God knows why I thought it, if I did." (4) Although a zebra and a telephone might be nothing of significance in the grander scheme of narratives within the works at hand, it becomes intriguing to analyze because of how both the characters pick something dismissive to compare themselves. Again, the idea of the self as it imagines itself for the external eyes looking in is an essential element in the quest for identity. Thus, when lost in its own trail of thoughts, the self tends to reveal a great deal of its own identity.

In the line of discourse related to the idea of the self, an intriguing compare and contrast exercise is seen in the theme of beauty and ugliness in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* with Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*. The character of Pecola and the character of Clementine both share this intense self-awareness of being ugly. However, this question of ugliness does not end simply with that statement of ugliness but transforms to enlighten readers with a series of revelations. In *The Bluest Eye*, a critical point that is always harped on heavily is the destructive idea of a stereotypical kind of beautiful:

Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another – physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. (119)

The concept here is given in a clear-cut manner with no confusing word plays. The intention is clear. It talks about the destructive nature of this beauty narrative. Although, Baldwin takes on ugliness in his character of Clementine, the treatment is different. For Clementine, she rests on this knowledge of self-awareness that does not produce lasting effects of insecurities or pain over appearance:

I could tell from a lot of things, such as, for example, I hardly ever went to Fonny's house but Fonny was always at mine... It was because the mother and them two sisters didn't want me. In one way, as I realized later, they didn't think that I was good enough for Fonny – which really means that they didn't think I was good enough for *them*... Well, I'm dark and my hair is just plain hair and there is nothing very outstanding about me and not even Fonny bothers to pretend I'm pretty, he just says that pretty girls are a terrible drag. (18)

Perhaps insecurity and inferiority complexes are always going to be different for different people to grasp and understand and perhaps that is why Morrison and Baldwin have both chosen to take on the concepts in varying degrees. However, the concept of what is ugly and what is beautiful is still taken on from this stereotype of beautiful to mean something more than "plain hair" and having "The bluest eye". This sense of introspection that arises from what the external views you as are important in the narrative of seeking an identity. It is noteworthy to mention that, even Baldwin in his personal life, held his eyes to be ugly which is recorded in *James Baldwin: A Biography* as – "An enduring and ever-present memory was of his stepfather making fun of his eyes and calling him the ugliest child he had ever seen." (Loc 216) And granted, just like Pecola who wanted blue eyes like a white person, even Baldwin reconciled with his ugly eyes only when he saw Bette Davis with the same set of eyes which is a white representation on a screen. However, the difference is that, while Morrison ends with a critique on the toxicity of stereotypical beauty being white which is an important narrative to discuss, Baldwin, true to his nature, transforms this concept by going beyond beauty to grasp power and talent – "Not only could 'ugliness' be beautiful, it could be associated with talent and might even be a source of power." (Loc 435) as recorded in Leemings' book on Baldwin.

Related to the case mentioned above of the self and its introspection, another element in that dynamic is the presence of external forces. To elaborate, the quest of the African American identity

is inevitably related to how the outsider looks at them. This would mean that when Clementine talked about “They”, it was the white population of the city looking at her and people like her. *If Beale Street Could Talk* engages a narrative about the African American identity in the face of law that oppresses them from a black and white perspective. Of course, it is important to keep in mind that however grand this narrative is, it cannot be simply reduced to this mere statement for the story involves a sense of how the individual deals with oppression. Nonetheless, the words that Fonny utters to Clementine after their encounter with the white cop with red hair and blue eyes reveal a great deal of how this external force threatens their very existence – “We live in a nation of pigs and murderers. I’m scared every time you out of my sight.” (141) The external force is an external threat in which they live a reality that is filled with inevitabilities. In an interview with Herbert R. Lottman, as recorded in *Conversations with James Baldwin*, Baldwin recounts the difficulty as a writer who is trying not to distort or his prejudice distort the story – “You try to keep yourself out, or you try not to distort, not to let your prejudices distort.” (109) Perhaps he meant this in regards to the fact that he was a writer trying to counter and cover both sides of the story. In regards to this external force, which in the case of *If Beale Street Could Talk* is about law enforcement, Baldwin in his piece “The White Man’s Guilt” from *Dark Days* gives a better elaboration of how he views them:

And I have seen it in the eyes of rookie cops in Harlem – rookie cops... who had to pretend to themselves that the black junkie, the black mother, the black father, the black child were of different human species than themselves. The southern sheriff, the rookie cop, could, and I suspect still can only deal with their lives and their duties by hiding behind the color curtain – a curtain which, indeed, eventually becomes their principal justification for the lives they lead. (48)

Fonny in his view of “pigs and murderers” seem to deal with how he views the repercussions of him being a black man in society. In “The White Man’s Guilt”, Baldwin further engages us to see from the

periphery of the “rookie cop” or the white cop that is chained to the idea of “the color curtain” that enables him to commit the atrocities that blacks like Fonny faces. Thus, using his fictional work, Baldwin explains the pathos of the oppressed while his non fictional work engages in further demonstrating how this chain of events work from the perspective of the white cop as well.

Furthermore, what is interesting about this externality from Baldwin’s point of perspective is that, he does not simply end it in reductions of the white population as something doomed and evil. Although, *If Beale Street Could Talk* is about a narrative that is very realistic in the kind of oppression that it deals with, Baldwin does not end it in just that aspect. While looking at “The White Man’s Guilt”, we find an elaboration about this external force:

This is the place in which, it seems to me, most white Americans find themselves. Impaled. They are dimly, or vividly, aware that the history they have fed themselves is mainly a lie, but they do not know how to release themselves from it, and they suffer enormously from the resulting personal incoherence. (45-46)

The intrigue of this narrative that Baldwin takes is that it is not reductive but transformative in how he perceives the part of the whiteness in the African American identity. He is quick to point out this “appallingly oppressive and bloody history, known all over the world” (41) that the white Americans are accountable for with an “inescapable responsibility” (41). The unique view that Baldwin has is that he does not want white Americans to simply end with this notice on their forehead about what they have done wrong. He scrutinizes means to go beyond just blaming into a place that can exist with change on the part of the white Americans. However, this place of being “Impaled” is a reality that cannot be avoided because of the constant need on the part of the white Americans to constantly defend and justify their history of oppression which is in fact, a reality. The “color curtain” is the complex that they have imposed on both races and now they deal with the repercussions. However excruciating the reality is

for African Americans, Baldwin does not end his narrative with only this aspect but emphasizes to go beyond one race to check the periphery of the other side with a kind of gentle aggression that is not completely misled by emphatic opinions but led by loud facts.

Traces of this juxtaposition between the white Americans and the African Americans are seen better in his other novels like *Another Country* which deals with intense love like we see in Clementine and Fonny but overshadowed by colour. Unlike Clementine and Fonny, Rufus and Leona suffered the brunt of the external eyes even more since they belonged to opposing races in the grander scheme of things. The intriguing thing to note is that both races deemed both to be lesser for dating the other instead of someone from within their own community. This question of less or more was not lost on the characters. This is seen in Rufus' retrospective thoughts on his relationship with Leona that was toxic in all senses of the word:

Rufus thought, But it's not possible to forget anybody you were that hung up on, who was that hung up on you. You can't forget anything that hurt so badly, went so deep, and changed his world forever. It's not possible to forget anybody you've destroyed. (58)

Perhaps the toxicity of racial prejudice in a relationship had foul endings but the duality of it is that Baldwin was also trying to reiterate the issue that the concept of colour or knowledge in general is something that one is ignorant of when they are born. Baldwin in his piece "Dark Days" in *Dark Days* talks about this initial ignorance as –

Not one of us – black or white – knows how to walk when we get here. Not one of us knows how to open a window, unlock a door... None of us comes here knowing enough not to play with fire. Nor can one of us drive a tank, fly a jet, hurl a bomb, or plant a tree. (1)

Yet growing in a society with institutions, both blacks and whites are fed with information and separation inevitably happens. Racism occurs with institutions

catering to only one child and not the other. Baldwin recounts this with –

And there is not a single institution in this country that is not a racist institution – beginning with churches, and by no means ignoring the unions – blacks were unable to seize the tools with which they could forge a genuine autonomy. (8-9)

This juxtaposition of colour and race is not lost in the translations of Baldwin's writings when it comes to analysis and dissection. The loss of innocence is carried home safely from his non fictional work to the representation of this same juxtaposition of opposing races in the story of Rufus and Leona from *Another Country*.

Thus, when it comes to Baldwin, the complexity and the duality of how he represents and presents narratives is always going to be intriguing and varied in its approach. However, it remains clear that as much as Baldwin became an inevitable spokesperson in the history of African American as a culture and in its literary history, he evaded the concept of him or the characters that he gave birth to, to become a redundant and reductive poster of oppression; and rather, he wanted the individuality of all the characters and himself to stand out. As stated in his biography by Leemings:

Baldwin was a writer who... took the side of those who were made into exiles and outcasts by barriers of race, sex, and class or who turned away from safety and chose the honorable path of tearing down such barriers. But he mourned for those who had created the barriers and had unwittingly allowed themselves to be destroyed by them. (Loc 112-120)

Baldwin would be remembered for mastering language and bringing transformative ideas home that spoke with empathy and clarity as when need be. As recorded in Raoul Peck's *James Baldwin: I Am Not Your Negro* – "At his funeral, Toni Morrison said, 'You give me a language to dwell in, a gift so perfect it seems my own invention.'" (x) Perhaps the greatest homage that can be presented to someone

is when language itself bends to make a home because you command it to.

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