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James Baldwin: A literary appraisal

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Abstract

James Baldwin ^[3] and Richard Wright ^[4] had before them the same aims and objectives. But there were differences in their attitudes and approaches. The element of heterosexuality is not at all there in the work of Richard Wright. But Baldwin's men are rarely heterosexual. Virility occupies no place in Baldwin. Critics are of the opinion that homosexuality gave Baldwin's work an original form. Unlike Richard Wright, Baldwin seems to be a hater of manhood and virility. We also see in his work the evolution of the racial problem of America. In his novels and his short stories, Baldwin attempts to find a solution to the racial problem which afflicts America. The most important thing is that in his work, the human problem occupies the prime place. The racial problem comes in second place. Baldwin is first and foremost an American. He always speaks like a prophet. There are contradictions in him, but they are only of 'seeming' nature.

Keywords: Homosexuality, Heterosexual, Virility, Racial problem, Evolution prophet contradictions.

Introduction

James Baldwin is a great black writer of America. He is not vehement like Richard Wright. He is tolerant and sympathetic. Homosexuality is there in his work, unlike in Wright's. The human problem is more important to him than the racial problem. He speaks like a prophet.

Main thrust

He also wanted improvement of the condition of African Americans. But as they were two different persons, there were differences in their attitudes and approaches too. Homosexuality is a very important element in James Baldwin. Baldwin's men are rarely happy with their heterosexual life. The element of homosexuality occupies a very important place in. James Baldwin's work. His men are not normal in the real sense of the word. What drives them away from normal sexual behaviour is perhaps the fear of facing the reality of life. John Grimes in 'Go Tell it on the Mountain', David in 'Giovanni's Room', Yves and Eric in 'Another Country' have almost no heterosexual relationships. In the literary world of Baldwin, it is better to be a homosexual than to be a heterosexual. Interestingly enough, however, there is no uniformity in the attitudes of these homosexuals towards themselves. There is a difference between the homosexuality of Eric and that of David. Eric accepts himself, but David tries to hide his homosexuality. Baldwin's homosexuals thus fail to live normally by accepting their homosexuality. They cannot live better with people around by this non-acceptance. They live out of harmony with their environment. For these people, homosexuality is a sign of courage and virility. For people around them, however, it is nothing like that. For them, it is just homosexuality, pure and simple. Elisha and John Grimes in 'Go Tell it on the Mountain', Giovanni and David in 'Giovanni's Room', and Leo Proudhammer and Christopher Hall in 'Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone' are good examples of this. This fear of accepting homosexuality on the part of Baldwin, to be honest enough, indicates that he is not sure of himself. In spite of this, he wants homosexuality to play an important and distinctive role. This shows some grave problems with Baldwin in this regard. He utterly fails to go deeper into sexuality or enrich this theme. The reason behind this is that he is incapable of sexuality. His own life goes to prove it. He did not marry perhaps for the same reason. Critics are of the opinion, however, that homosexuality gave Baldwin's work an original form. This enabled him to establish close relations with his original environment and with the while world. Baldwin seems to be, unlike Richard Wright,

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a hater of manhood and virility. In his works, the real men, who have a determined character are destroyed by adversity. They do not occupy much space in the narrative. Richard in 'Go Tell it on the Mountain' commits suicide in desperation. This desperation comes from his inability to succeed in a white world that only wants his destruction. The same thing happens to Rufus Scott in 'Another Country'. He, too, commits suicide for the same reason as Richard. Richard Henry, in 'Blues for Mister Charlie' is coldly murdered by a white man. This white fellow insists on showing blacks than whites intend to remain master of the situation. Virility occupies no place in Baldwin's work. He does not perhaps wish to recognize such a quality in the vast majority of the men he depicts in his work especially if they are black. This may either be his considered view of his literary plan. Critics establish a connection between the lack of virility in Baldwin's black man and the manner in which Baldwin tried to destroy and for this, he must submit to the white world. Richard Wright's black man, on the other hand, is not afraid to face the reality. He is ready to do everything to protect and affirm his masculinity. This all powerful masculinity pervades Wright's work. Baldwin did not believe the black man capable of courage and firmness. And that is why he so vehemently strove to destroy the virility in Wright's work.

Baldwin is ceaselessly preoccupied with the evil influence that the white world has on black. We see this constant preoccupation of his in his essays, novels, short stories and plays. He underlines that the Christian religion serves solely the interests of the white world. In his opinion, the religion of Christ belongs only to whites. And, in this situation, both the white world and the Christian church must change their attitude towards the black in order to avoid an imminent catastrophe. In Baldwin's opinion, the catastrophe would affect all the peoples of the earth. What Baldwin ardently desired was a radical change in the attitude of the white man towards the man of colour. He wished to point out that with the passage of time, the black man was sure to change. And hence, the white world and the Christian Church must be prepared to reciprocate by changing their attitude towards the black man. Baldwin wanted the white world and the Christian Church to restructure them. He hoped with all his heart that the black man would be able to experience an existence in which prejudices, segregation and contempt would no longer have any place. To achieve that objective, he recommended that black primary schools, high schools and universities be granted greater autonomy, the police assigned to patrol black neighborhoods consist only of blacks and that segregation, rampant in American trade union, as well as in large industries, be abolished. Baldwin wanted his country to change its ways quite radically. Then alone could America become a really liberal and democratic country. He wanted American whites to try to understand the black man. In that case, they would not be afraid of him, violent and blind in their reaction to the black man's unforeseen deeds.

In the work of Baldwin, we see the evolution of the racial situation in America during the fifties and sixties reflected faithfully. That is why if during the fifties his approach was calm and objective, the one adopted by him in the sixties and in the early seventies is just the opposite of that he seems to have lost control over himself during this period. In the late sixties and the early seventies, he seemed to delight in coarse and vulgar language. Perhaps he had come

to the conclusion that white America was not going to change. He seems to have abandoned all hope for his country. A period of fifteen years separates the religious atmosphere and language of 'Go Tell it on the Mountain' from the violence and the vulgarity of 'Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone'. These fifteen years mark an evolution in Baldwin's thought.

As about James Baldwin's literary prowess, it took a downward plunge in his 'Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone'. In it, there is a huge gap between his voice and his feelings as they are described through Leo Proudhammer and Christopher Hail's militant attitude. In this novel, Baldwin the prophet and Baldwin the artist seem to be two people very different from each other. There is thus a double personality in his. Baldwin attempts, in his novels and his short stories to find a solution to the racial problem which afflicts America. In 'Go Tell it on the Mountain', he tries to describe the deep and complex meaning of being black and living in Harlem. In 'Giovanni's Room', he attempts to explain love and give it a proper meaning. In 'Another Country', he shows that through a pure and free love a mutual and human understanding can exist. The most important thing about Baldwin is that in his work, the human problem occupies the prime place. The racial question comes in second place. Baldwin is first and foremost an American. The individual's humanity, according to time, comes before everything else. He hopes to win the hearts of his fellow-countrymen by using human arguments. And as most of the time his public is predominantly white and not black, certain blacks have even called him a modern day Uncle Tom. The fact is that he always speaks like a prophet. There are contradictions in him, but they are only of a 'seeming' nature. They have always been there in his writings, since the appearance of 'The Fire Next Time!' But a prophet he really was, he had told Robert ^[2] Penn Warren so in 1964 adding that he believed firmly in the future of a total integration in the United State.

Later, Baldwin seems to have given himself up to despair. In 1970, he declared to Margaret Mead ^[3] that he no longer nourished any hope for racial integration in America and that is why he returned to France to be better able to express himself there. Baldwin wanted to play the role of a prophet and spokesman for blacks. We know from his 'Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone' that Baldwin accepted himself as a representative of the black movement. In this novel, the emotions and the feelings of Leo Proudhammer and Christopher Hall are those of Baldwin himself. Baldwin used the novel in order to give free rein to his literary talents. The rest of his work, chiefly his essays, helped him to discuss current problems and to speculate about the future of his country. The fire Next Time is a collection of such essays. This collection is a powerful prophetic exhortation. Here Baldwin goes from the role of a critic to that of a prophet. Only a few years before the publication of this book of essays, Baldwin had vehemently attacked anti-establishment literature that is, protest literature. And now he himself was using protest as literary tool. He was doing what Richard Wright had done before him and for which he had attached Wright so bitterly. The fact is that it was the need of the time. Baldwin was filling the space vacated by the death of Richard Wright. Baldwin could not help it. Nobody in his position could.

Wright and Baldwin thus tried their best, in their different ways, to do the same thing; to let the American black have

his proper place in America. This is the point of convergence between these two ways, both were equally worried and agonized by this problem.

The present dissertation on the racial problem in America that takes into account the works of the two most celebrated black writers 'Content' in the problem of racism is 'humanism'. Both Wright and Baldwin are broadly of the same view on this, but Wright is rather 'a bit more black' than Baldwin. As about the other one, that is approach further into the history of black writing on American racism, we find that as Baldwin rejected Wright, so were both of them rejected by their successors of the 'Black Power' school of African American writing.

Richard Wright was the forerunner of the civil rights movements that swept America in the sixties. He resorted to violent protest in his writings. Without his violent protest against the way African Americans were treated in America, whites would have scarcely been aware of the gravity of their country's racial situation. On the other hand, during tumultuous sixties, Baldwin played a very different role as a writer. He calmed the spirits by preaching love and harmony between black and white Americans, who turned to him to understand the disease as well as the cure of it. Had Baldwin not been there on the scene during this stormy period, the racial situation in the U.S. would have perhaps been more serious that it was. In this way, both Wright and Baldwin complemented each other in this regard. Both of them helped American blacks have their rights as a full citizen recognized. Wright's role was the one of raising a voice full of extreme anger whereas Baldwin's role was to calm the anger of all. Baldwin resorted to protest during the late sixties. But this does not lessen his role as a pacifist and calmer of frayed nerves. By this time, the American blacks had got a lot in every field, employment being the most important in these. America had, by that time, started recognizing the merit of the black man. In spite of his 'colour'. Not only could Baldwin afford to resort to protest during this period, he could protest without the danger of provoking violence. In less than a decade, blacks in America had traveled as good as hundreds of miles in their racial history. Thus, protest had not remained the same as it was when Wright had resorted to it.

In this way, it can be said that Wright belongs to the beginning, to the past. At that time, everything revolved round the colour of the individual in the United States. And protest was seen as the only weapon to force the opponent into a compromise. Baldwin occupied himself with human aspect of the racial problem. His endeavor was to penetrate the secrets of human nature in race relations. For this, he came back to the United States. Richard Wright did not have this opportunity. The uncongenial atmosphere of the forties forced him to leave America. As he could not say what he wished about his own country's racial situation, he had to find a country where he could express himself freely. Both Wright and Baldwin wanted whites to accept blacks as human beings, and both of them wanted this to happen in a normal way. It was up to the whites of America to listen and to respond. It was quite clear that whites and blacks belonged to two different cultures. But a certain kind of integration between these two-Anglo-Saxon and Afro-American – cultures was the need of America, and of humanity at large. Neither of the two could afford to cling militantly to their individual culture. If exclusive Anglo-Saxonism was unacceptable, so was exclusive Black

Nationalism of Afro-Americans. This has to be understood in the context of the militant black nationalism preached and propagated by the crusaders of Black Power. Both Wright and Baldwin wanted the blacks of America to develop an attitude of integration and harmony with the white culture of that country. Wright had encouraged blacks not to detach themselves from American life and culture, but he also wanted them to retain their racial pride. James Baldwin had repeated constantly in the sixties that this racial integration was the only thing to save America from breaking up. He had time and again warned that if white America was unwilling to make concessions to blacks, the majority of the latter would end up letting them be carried away by Black Nationalism. The abrupt surge and popularity of Black Power later had proved Baldwin right.

As about the second angle of this study, the one of the manner, that is, the mode, or, in other words, the 'literary' angle, it needs to be asserted that the literary side of the American black problem is linked quite closely to its human aspect. If there is honesty in the literary approach, the result of it is sure to be positive. If writers display honesty in their works, and do not take recourse to fictions and fabrication, the outcome of it for race relations will be auspicious for tolerance for tolerance and countries to represent reality in his works as it is. But he strives, simultaneously, to highlight the most promising aspects of the problem. In this way, his essays reflect a deep desire to see America strong and united. Richard Wright was not, to be honest enough, as great an optimist as James Baldwin. He had his doubts about racial integration in the United States. Though he displays such an honesty in *The Outsider*, in which the hero is in search of his identity, he lets his hero prefer death rather than accept the role assigned to him by whites. Wright highlights the absurdity of the black's condition, whereas Baldwin wants sense and reason to dominate the literary work. Baldwin is the messiah of optimism whereas Wright is the prophet of violence and despair, but they are both equally frank in expressing their ideas. Both of them had the same inspiration and hence belong to the same sphere of literary writing. Both deal with the problem of American racism in their works, and both hope for a dialogue with white America. Both wrote for black and white America like most of their predecessors. Wright and Baldwin drew themselves closer to the white world in order to be understood better. They were thus becoming estranged from their black environment, and faced, as their critics thought, assimilation by white culture. They were accused of wanting to write like Whites. In the sixties, Leroi Jones reacted quite violently to this tendency of black writers. Such an attitude like that of Leroi Jones contributes only to keeping the cultural separation between blacks and whites even greater. The militant black nationalism of such writers can provide no positive aspect for race relations. In America Writing parochially in black dialect, for example, can serve no great purpose. Both white American literature and black American literature should contribute to other in harmonious reciprocity.

Conclusion

Through his writings, Baldwin spread the message of love and harmony in America. There is no Bigger Thomas in Baldwin. Humanity is his prime concern. History proved that Baldwin's and not Wrights', approach was correct.

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