

A Study On James Baldwin: Beyond Race And Caste

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Abstract

Baldwin's words do not spring only from the experience of being black in America. His words essentially are of a man who has risked all to see beyond his blackness, who has daringly put all the actors in the historical crime of slavery in the witness box, where they are questioned by him about their cruelty, their silence, their violence, and their ability to inflict pain. Baldwin has questioned the entirety of America. Such an ability, to question the conscience of a nation like America—which is largely shaped by violence and silence—develops in a person after he has found the meaning of his own endurance to pain, in his own past and in that of his ancestors; and when he rises above all the categories which bind him in the present mentally.

Keywords: Dalit, black literature, enslaved person, psychological, untouchables, exploitation

Introduction

Brilliant Baldwin's contemplations on the problems of his people are far more profound than I expected. They are sharp, but not reactive. He is filled with compassion, but not weak. His examination of race is neither ointment nor surgery for the badly-wounded American conscience, fractured by the longitudinal effects of slavery. He offers a scope for redemption, in a purely psychological sense, which is a rare ability found in few writers. This is because Baldwin is an unapologetically honest artist whose vision is not marred by his immediate identity. To me—writing naively, reactively and angrily in 2014—Baldwin came as an opportunity to look within, inside, rather than outside; to find answers to the dilemmas which people like him (or I) are subjected to as

witnesses and which we cannot avoid even in our graves. What he says in *Notes of a Native Son* is irrefutable:

“In the context of the Negro problem neither whites nor blacks, for excellent reasons of their own, have the faintest desire to look back; but I think that the past is all that makes the present coherent, and further, that the past will remain horrible for exactly as long as we refuse to assess it honestly.

This is truth. What Baldwin says holds true in the context of life in America, especially regarding the silence against white violence. And it is true of India, where brahmanical violence is invisible, does not have a body of colour, but is omnipotent in the minds of millions of people across castes who follow its social, cultural, psychological codes in their public and personal life.

The past appears as a ghostly shadow in the lives of dalits, something we do not want looming over us. But it is just ignorance which makes us try to avoid this shadow, for we cannot escape it. Unlike white violence, atrocities against dalits are just a visible manifestation of brahmanical violence. Unlike, because caste atrocities are the violence within a race, of one caste over another.

Baldwin is right as well when I think of myself from a few years ago—when there was a fear within me about associating with my past, when I was unaware that delinking myself from my roots will only push me to destroy the longing that lives in me. This sense of longing is the key to my discovery of myself in the present. Baldwin convinced me that this was so, but to cultivate a “sense of longing”, which is the opposite of the desire to “escape from a horrible past”, is not easy. Confronting this sense of longing has a price, and one has to pay it.

Baldwin unveils for us the reality of a black man’s existence and what it means to Americans and America. He says in *Notes of a Native Son*:

“The story of the Negro in America is the story of America—or, more precisely, it is the story of Americans. It is not a very pretty story: the story of people is never pretty. The Negro in America, gloomily referred to as that shadow which lies athwart our national life, is far more than that. He is a series of shadows, self-created, intertwining, which now we helplessly battle. One may say that the Negro in America does not really exist except in the darkness of our minds.”

In India, Dalits are the protagonist of boycotted society. The African Americans are also the protagonist of Black America. One is robbed and degraded by the White community and the other by Savarna society. One was brought and sold from their homeland, and the other was called Untouchable by birth. As observed by D.Gnaniah, "There are ample grounds to compare and contrast the brief history of the Blacks in the USA and the age-long ancient history of the misery of Dalits in India. There are numerous similarities of both these black people, especially in their sufferings and miseries, legal and illegal violence, segregations and ghettos, whippings and punishments, poverty and hunger, brainwashing and punishments, livelihood, employment, education and culture, denial of entry into Churches and Temples, Untouchability and apartheid, housing and civic facilities, suppression, and oppression, above all total exclusion from the social order." It is well-known that Dalits and Africans, both societies, are engaged in similar kinds of liberation movements. These two societies are different in terms of place and time, so their literature should have certain limitations and differences.

On the other hand, the Dalits of India have been compared with the enslaved Africans. Africans were captured, brought to America, and sold in August 1619. From this, the slavery of African Americans began. On the other hand, Dalits of India have experienced slavery since ancient times. So we find these writers' search for identity in their literature. In America, racism was the critical factor, and in India, the caste system was the deep-rooted factor that affected India's socio-economic and socio-cultural system.

Untouchables were the most exploited and unwanted category. They were suppressed economically, culturally, and politically too. Some experts feel that the Aryans, who were fair-skinned people who invaded India and controlled this dark-skinned people and stamped them lower and became untouchables after that. The Rigveda, the sacred text of Hindus, divided people into four 'Varnas,' namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Shudras. Here also, Shudras were highly exploited people. Some specific professions like butchers, leatherworkers, launderers, and latrine cleaners were also labeled untouchables. The economic situation of both the people, i.e., Black and Dalits, were the same in their

countries. These people were at the bottom of their social hierarchy. In America, these Black people were like cattle who were tortured a lot. Black writers focus on these issues related to their harassment. Writers like Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Paul Lawrence Dunbar find racism a significant theme in their novels. Women writers like Nella Larsen, Ann Petry, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker also discuss their essential reality. American society was divided into two categories, i.e., 'master' and 'slave.'

Black Literature:

It is also called African American literature. It is the work created by Americans of African descent or literary work written about African experiences. Black literature reflects the development and history of the United States through the eyes of the exploited group of the society. The term black literature covers a wide range of works, from slave narratives of the 19th century to contemporary black literature. Black literature is found in the late 18th century. In America, Blacks were disadvantaged in all the opportunities and fundamental rights. They fought for their human dignity. These Black people were denied education; they were not allowed to participate in politics. In the 1940s and 1950s, three Black writers made an invaluable contribution to what at that time was called "Literature of the Blacks in America

'Native Son' by Richard Wright, 'Invisible man' by Ralph Ellison, and 'Tell It on the Mountain' by James Baldwin are novels about the Blacks in America. As R. Bhonsle noticed and said, "The three novels are the record of a common experience. They reveal attitudes of the whites towards the blacks and its devastating effects on the psychology of the blacks."

Dalit Literature:

In India caste system was the root of discrimination. The Indian scenario was also not significantly different. As Shivaji Sagar observes it, "In India, Dalits were not legally enslaved like the Africans in America, but their plight was worse than that of the enslaved Black people. Until recently, they were denied the right to education; they were forced to live outside the villages, and the public places and temples were closed to them. Shudras were from the lower class, and they were treated as if they did not belong to the human race. The evil thing practiced was untouchability. It was believed that the mere touch or even the shadow of a Shudra spoils the sanctity

of the Savarna." These untouchables remained outcasts. The Hindu varna system-imposed slavery on them. They were tortured for along time in India. They don't have a home or village. Their trouble is found in Dalit literature. The Hindu caste system denied these low caste people any right to education. In the late 1960s and 1970s when the militant Black Panthers and their claims of Black power motivated a group of young Dalit poets. Thenthey proudly called themselves Dalit Panthers. Atthattime, theywerethefirst who used the word 'Dalit,' which became an accepted term for the untouchables. Dalits have no literary historyoftheir own, and they had produced no literature till the last quarter ofthe 19th century. It is familiar that Dalit literature is one of the most important literary movements to emerge in post-independent India. The term 'Dalit Literature' was first applied in 1958 at the first Dalit conference held in Bombay.

Sharan Kumar Limbale (2004) observes differences in the treatment given to both:"The plight of African Americans and Dalits can be compared in several ways. Although the African Americans were enslaved, they could buy their freedom with money. At the time, Dalits were technically not slaves; they could not even pay their house rent. The white masters were responsible for looking after the enslaved Black person. Since untouchables were not slaves, the savarnas had no concern for them. Untouchables are societal enslaved people. The cause of African slavery was economic. The root of the Dalit's untouchability is social. African Americans can do any work, but their work is not considered undignified, while Dalits can perform the lowest type of job, but their labor is always termed 'undignified .'While African Americans cannot hide the color of his skin, Dalit cannot hide his caste." We have many prominent Dalit writers today, like Lakshman Mane, Lakshman Gaikwad, and Kishore Kale, who have significantly impacted their communities.

In both the cases of Dalit and Blacks, God did not ordain slavery. Human beings created it. They had imposed slavery on Blacks and Dalits. In 1946, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar wrote to W.E.B.DuBois, the prominent African –American scholar: "There is so much similarity between the position of the untouchables in India and of the position of negroes in America that the study of the latter is not only natural but necessary. I was very interested to read that the Negroes of

America has filed a petition to the UNO (United Nations Organisations).”

There are similarities in their histories also. The African-American literature is known as "Literature of Slaves." The enslaved people brought from Africa to work on the plantations of the white men sang to themselves the songs of their miseries and spiritual yearnings. These songs came down from generation to generation in the oral form known as 'blues'. These blues were the source of inspiration to many poets.

In 1953 Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, testified anew to the sophisticated formal experimentation and piercing examination of African American consciousness of which the writers coming of age in the 1950s were capable. The story of religious conversion experienced by 14-year-old John Grimes of Harlem, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* places in creative tension its hero's spiritual awakening and his determination to gain his independence from his oppressive stepfather. The result is a novel of unprecedented honesty in its revelation of generational and gender conflicts between its central characters, who constitute an African American family haunted by self-hatred, guilt, the psychological scars of racism, unsanctioned sexual desire, and a hunger for deliverance. Two years after *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin collected his essays in *Notes of a Native Son*, a mix of autobiography and political commentary on race relations in America that identified Baldwin as the new conscience of the nation on racial matters. Subsequent volumes of essays, *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961) and *The Fire Next Time* (1963), underlined Baldwin's fame as the most incisive and passionate essayist ever produced by Black America. His novels of the 1950s and '60s—particularly *Giovanni's Room* (1956), the first African American novel to treat homosexuality openly, and *Another Country* (1962), a bestseller that examined bisexuality, interracial sex, and the many prejudices that enforced hierarchies of difference in American society—confirmed Baldwin's leadership among those Black American writers at mid-century who wanted to move fiction toward a renewed search for personal meaning and redemption while challenging the white

American consensus that viewed triumph in World War II as a vindication of the American way on the racial home front.

Baldwin's experiences of being a black man in America and living in Europe give his imagination a unique dimension, not just in his literary aspects but in the insights he gathers into life itself. His literary imagination is in constant pursuit of an idea of personhood beyond race. This makes him one of the most profound thinkers of his time, perhaps all time. He knows that underneath the very apparent racism based on colour (or race) there exists a psyche of oppression which is universal in nature. Meaning that if this psyche is the cause of oppression in America, it may well be the cause of oppression in other parts of the world, where it could be based on other "reasons".

It is no coincidence that only three decades after his death, "caste" became recognisable in America in the discourse about oppression. Baldwin was profound because his words predicted this outcome. To him, the sufferer of institutional oppression at one place also carries the potential to break the chain of suffering at another place, no matter how alien both are to each other.

Conclusion

Both Dalits and Afro-Americans have protested against religions that perpetuated their enslavement. Even after the abolition of slavery White American has continued to hold the black man in 'enslavement' by keeping alive an image of 'Blackness'. In their fiction, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison have shown these sensitive portrayals of self-hatred and experiences. Both the literature was written for social change. Today, Dalits have created their own culture in India. On the other hand, Blacks in America have developed their own culture. It can be seen that there are strong similarities between the outcome of racial discrimination in the U.S. and caste discrimination in India. The root cause of their endless pain and suffering was not their fault. There are some similarities in their rebellion, hopes, and desires. However, their languages are different, and the state of mind and the emotions expressed through these pieces of literature are similar. Both kinds of literature search for self-identity through their literature.

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