

Portrayal of racial inequality and lgbtq community in the novels of james baldwin

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James Arthur Baldwin was an African American essayist, novelist, and playwright who wrote passionately on the subject of race in America. He was an important voice in the United States. This was particularly in the late 1950s and early 1960s and later. He was born in 1924 in Harlem, New York City. Since the 1920s, Harlem is known as a major African American residential, cultural and business centre. With time Baldwin became an articulate spokesperson for the Civil Rights of African Americans. He writes about their struggles, how they overcame them and how their problems continue to be prevalent now as well.

Through the idea of subways in New York city, Baldwin describes how geographical segregation worked in the city. The subway train has everyone- light and dark skinned. They get on at one stop and get off at another. However, they get on and off at stops majorly dominated by their skin type. Harlem and Greenwich being an area for the African American community. The racial segregation makes Baldwin lose hope for people.

Baldwin's novels focus on dynamics such as the social pressures growing toward not only the African American community but also LGBT- Lesbian Gay, Bisexual and Transgender community. Having been secluded from both at a given point of time, his writing has played an important role in representing the psychological pressures that they as a community and as independent individuals face. Baldwin did not just focus on how black men survived or how queer men went ahead with their lives. He focussed on how a black and queer man could be criminalised for both. Baldwin took

inspiration from his own life. He wrote on taboo topics and it was complex and for this reason alone they often tried to eradicate him.

Clifford Thompson was in his twenties when he moves to New York to become a writer. He was familiar with Baldwin's work. He received eleven of Baldwin's books as presents and that changed his life. Thompson believes that many writers were as good as Baldwin but he has "yet to encounter Baldwin's equal at creating a sense of intimacy with the reader". He thinks that Baldwin emphasises the fact that Americans are somewhere unaccepting of each other and fall short of love for one another. His sharp observation is supported by how his novels often talk of the inability to love; the inability to love another woman or man.

The path Baldwin chose wasn't easy. He was pushed to the sidelines of the black power movement by his own community. He was excluded from the struggle and uprise LGBT rights. The former because of his sexuality and latter because of his colour. But Baldwin refused to stop. He voiced his struggles so that they become to be known in all communities and understand his true intention- of speak out against every oppression and the face of injustice. Baldwin's works were criticised but his ability to grab the attention of the readers is mesmerising as he talks about the struggle of four hundred years prevailing years later as well.

Critic Mario Puzo of The New York Times calls Baldwin a "tragic" artist who predicted the black revolution in advance. He was brave enough to become a part of a movement and then fight for the rights and for what is right. He

called out what was wrong. He considers his writing to be magical that is topped with his passion, compassion, intelligence and understanding of people around him. Puzo considers the relationships portrayed in his novels “moving and heartbreaking” even if some of the characters could lack depth. Puzo believes that at the end of every work, Baldwins stand as an artist becomes clear and his work is a propaganda novel or essay. They never fail to capture the struggle despite this. He would politicise his work accordingly.

Another Country is considered a love-hate novel with hatred outweighing the former and Tell Me How Long The Train’s Been Gone is also a love-hate novel but with love being superior here. Both the novels circle around artists- while one chooses to express his art through performance on stage, the other uses a musical instrument for the same. Their stories tie people around them together, the effect that their presence and absence has on them. They are both somewhat outcasts in their own community, having secrets of their own that they somehow manage to keep concealed.

His novels always capture the true essence of Harlem and Greenwich Village because of his personal experiences. They are almost autobiographical in nature, on which Baldwin says, “ One writes out of one thing only - one’s own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. This is the only real concern oft he artist, to recreate art of the disorder of life that order which is art.” He has spent a majority of his life and his novels travel back and forth from both the places. His characters would familiarise themselves with both the places. His representation of people and their attitude would

be apt. Be it the stares that Leo or Rufus would get with white women wrapped around their arms. Or the way people would portray them after thinking about their past relationships.

The novel *Tell Me How Long The Trains Been Gone* was published in 1968. Like most of his novels, it centres around Harlem and Greenwich. The protagonist moves from Harlem, to Greenwich. The African American protagonist of the story, Leo Proudhammer is an actor. It tells the story of his rise to fame as an actor from his youth in Harlem. Growing up, Leo had to face the wrath of racism daily and that encouraged him to fight his way through oppression and speak up to exploitation.

The novel discusses institutional racism and white privilege, homosexuality and bisexuality. The lives of Leo and his white artistic partner Barbara are intertwined due to racial pressures and Leo's bisexuality that is explored through his previous relationships with men who make an appearance in the novel. Leo has a heart attack on stage and dies but the story is told from the point of view of the ten year old Leo- the Leo who is protected by his elder brother Caleb, the Leo who is still trying to figure out what he has done wrong. Leo is small and sissy and he is trying to understand and overcome the obstacles he faces every day.

Claudia Roth Pierpont, the staff reporter at *The New Yorker* referred to Baldwin's works as depthless like *Tell me How Long The Trains Been Gone*. However, she has also called said that " there was a larger lesson to be drawn from the hard-won wisdom, offered from his father's grave, that

hatred “ never failed to destroy the man who hated and this was an immutable law”.” According to her, his work made unique statements in their own. She believes that the characters in the novel apart from the dark skinned ones lacked any depth of their own. Their struggles and issues are only mildly highlighted. They are secondary characters in their own story, their purpose is to support and highlight the struggles and matters of those around them. Barbara is present to show the delicate and virtuous side of people.

The story of Leo Proudhammer has him have a heart attack on stage that results in an end to his reel and real life. His parter Barbara shares a complicated relationship with him. On one hand they had been lovers but soon their relationship turns awkward when they start viewing each other as siblings. Barbara goes on to have a relationship with Leo’s brother Caleb instead. This happens because Leo finds it unbearable and stressful to be in a interracial relationship. He always feels as if he needs to look over his shoulder and the glances from people and the shift in their attitude really begins to bother him. He is unable to do it any longer. When his brother and Barbara get together, Leo pushes the both of them further away.

However Leo accepts love from another human and love toward himself soon. This happens when he falls in love with “ Black” Christopher, who is a lot like Leo but at a younger age. Christoper is someone who is tough enough to handle everything thrown his way, proud enough to accept it and hungry to fight it out. Embracing Christopher is something difficult for Leo but he learns to do it and he accepts his bisexuality with it as well. It is like a

role that he plays. They are bisexual characters but they are often tagged as “homosexual”, the two being completely different. Baldwin had been mature enough to separate the two and also to introduce them.

He has focussed on writing that puts an emphasis on the struggles of the black community and the issues that would be prevalent till the colour of the skin is going to be the first thing that people notice. He is sensitive to the topic and the disapproval by the community to same sex couples. Racial and homophobic slurs often make it suffocating for people to survive. He incorporates their struggles in the forms of stories and instances. People are not kind to other people. There could have been a time when colour and sexuality were never defined, black or white, there were no labels.

The love in his work, it is not silent but rather talks about the violence of an unequal world in a magical manner. Baldwin described love “in the tough and universal sense of daring and growth”. After having sex for the first time Barbara tells Leo: “I know what I am doing. You’re black. I’m white. Now, that doesn’t mean shit, really, and yet it means everything.” Leo reflects regularly on the difficulties of real solidarity. Barbara is fully aware of the backlash he is going to face from her community, she knows the criticism she is going to face. People were not able to accept inter-racial couples and that often resulted in couples being outed from their community and people turned their backs on them. Associating with someone from the other race was frowned upon. They were looked at as a threat, as if they have indulged in a guilty pleasure that was almost a mistake.

Baldwin says, “ It is easier to walk such a gauntlet alone. It is very hard for two, especially if they care about each other, especially if one is black and one is white, especially if one is male and one is female”, while they still choose to walk that path together. As an author, he has penned many works that focus on the issues of sexuality and race. As someone who has been familiar with it, Baldwin makes sure that he focuses on making the readers understand their side of the story, a side that is unfiltered. His own personal life is separated but having been present during the injustices and the inequality, his accounts are true in nature.

His novel *Another Country* is set in Greenwich village during the 1950s. In the 20th century, Greenwich Village was popularly called an artists' haven and it was also the root of the modern LGBT movement. The book circles around the life of a jazz drummer Rufus and the life of the people around him after he commits suicide by jumping off the bridge. The characters in the novel are a mix. Through them, the homophobia amongst people and the racism in interracial relationships comes out. The effects on homophobia in the straight world and the racism are imposed on people. Baldwin does not hesitate to incorporate true events as fiction in order to do the same.

Ben Kiely penned his opinion on Baldwin and called him a contradictory man. He thinks that Baldwin “ By not “ fixing” his characters' attractions in a singular direction, Baldwin offers alternative, fluid, and flexible potentialities for sexual desire”. He believes that his stories are layered that reveal the “ gravity of race relations in America” and “ models of sexuality and sexual otherness in favour of the hetero-mode”. Kiely believes that Baldwin offers a

touching resistance to sexual identity and aim and doesn't free his characters of the challenges that one experiences. Baldwin was one of a kind, having the ability to write about the topics that people would only discuss in hushed tones in a closed space. He came out of the closet and helped bring out what people had been tired of keeping in.

Another Country has a more human portrayal of gays and their personal relationships. It is positive gay identity and it's one of the few during the early twentieth century to show a fulfilling gay relationship. Rufus has an encounter with a man who later goes on to have an encounter with his best friend, Vivaldo. It does not show one as the submissive feminine type character but as strong individuals. They are not overshadowed and there are no gender roles segregating them. The men have independent relations with women, women of colour and it is only revealed later of the multiplicity of their preferences. It goes on to reveal the interlink between gender stereotypes, racial and gender oppression in America.

The first few pages of the novel show small instances of racial discrimination- when Rufus is wandering on the road, a policeman gives him a look. It's not mentioned if the policeman is of a coloured race or white. The police force was dominated by the white privileged class with very few African-Americans. The look could mean that the policemen somehow felt the need to attack Rufus with his eyes, to display his superiority. A few pages later when Rufus is with a white woman, Leona, a few policemen pass by 'carefully' and conveyed their awareness of the men of colour standing around and the white people who chose to associate with them. This made

Rufus angry. Racism isn't always screaming racial slurs at coloured people or outing them in public. It is little instances that don't need action but just a blink of an eye to make them feel unwanted and inferior. They have xenophobia and it becomes evident from the shift in the present air.

In instances when Leona talks about how she finds New York wonderful, it sends Rufus back to the mistreatment he had faced as a child, when white people had gone beyond just plain vengeance onto personal sadism. He didn't see the city as she did. They are stared at by people around the city when they step out, some looking down on them and some feeling pity. They are never looked at as normal couple. People always look at them as if they are breaking the moral rule. They should be segregated. Rufus has a sister Ida, who feels the same way. In multiple instances she feels as if when people look at her, they only see her as a coloured young girl and not as someone who has more credentials than that. She falls in love with Vivaldo and accepts that it is difficult for her to love Vivaldo. It's a new feeling, he's white. He too wonders about her lovers of her past and what role the colour of their skin must have played in her life.

Eric, is the man through whom the readers get introduced to Rufus' bisexuality. He loved Rufus of his 'chocolate chest' and even after Rufus dies, there is something about him that hangs over. Eric has fallen in love with a man in France but even in Yves he finds qualities of Rufus that attract him more.

There are people who see colour and there are people who don't. Baldwin writes beautifully about the ones who don't. He writes about how they struggle to help people see the beautiful side of everyone and how colour doesn't matter to them. White people are shown to be devoid of humanity and goodness. The cops humiliate the black men and their families. But characters like Barbara and Leona instil faith among people with their kind and caring nature. This is what makes them so special. They do not see them as coloured people but just as human beings who give and care for the people they love. They do not try and justify the humiliation that African Americans have to face in the United States but rather, they try to form an opinion in the minds of African Americans about themselves that distinguishes them from their own community.

As an author, Baldwin has taken part in the Civil Rights movement and been an activist of it. He has had the courage to confront the system that always pushes them at the back of the line. This system has held them down. Baldwin has let go of the disabled the gloominess due to the experiences of his youth. He has now furiously accepted the struggle and problems for liberation. *Tell Me How Long The Train's Been Gone* is the story of an angry black man. It has his friends and lovers weaving their stories together. Everyone is fighting their way through life. Everyone is left to figure it out for themselves.

In both his novels, there is a striking similarity. Baldwin makes it clear of how men of colour were treated in public places-bars, hospitals and how it was always the black man v/s the rest of the white community. The stories of

these people are based on problems that stem from centuries old racism that still runs through the veins of people in the form of milk that only turns bitter with days. The rage is incomprehensible and the outcome is only bitter and hurtful. To this day, the novels by Baldwin are relevant because people of colour are still struggling to get by.