

James Baldwin's Female Characters

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Abstract

This paper attempts deep vision of James Baldwin's real-life characters especially female characters in his fictional world. In the activist writer shows the American life influenced about the black people pain and sufferings. Baldwin's last forty years spend a kind of repetition of his themes, ideas and beliefs to explode till his death. He strongly approached love is the only way of save mankind from danger and disaster. His women characters always show more personal and global intelligence.

Keywords: James Baldwin, Female characters, Love, Civil Rights Movements, Mankind Stereotypes, Inequality, oppression.

It is generally understood that depiction of female characters has been a well-knitted and challenging task for writers – both men and women. The equality of men and women is a common notion being absent from literature, there has often been a certain aura, a certain mystery surrounding the make-up of the female, perhaps stemming from a lack of insight into her character. Generally speaking, writers have mostly maintained a protective and patronizing attitude in depicting women characters largely maintaining a very strict role definition for the women and most male authors have often been found depicting only flat and poorly developed female portraits. This happens due to the fact that the so-called male writers have not been able to penetrate the female psyche to draw an accurate picture of her or perhaps have not cared to. In either case, the readers have often been left with stereotypes. Female authors too have failed to draw convincing portraits of self-sufficient women. Even Jane Austen's women characters lack wholeness in that they are found to be passionless beings getting confined to a stiflingly narrow atmosphere and lack profundity. Marriage seems to be the only obsession and they desire nothing more, than marriage and family life which are supposed to be their goals in life.

In the fictional world of both Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte, women are pictured as female beings out and out confined to passive emotions. From the earliest folktales and the oldest biblical stories, through the literature of Hawthorne, Cooper, Irving and even twentieth century authors like Hemingway and Fitzgerald, women have not been drawn at all as human, self-fulfilling individuals with the infinite contradictions and conflicts of the human psyche. They have been depicted by them as 'Stereotypes'. But the works of James Baldwin are found to be depicting the female characters as extraordinarily strong, dynamic and even more importantly alive and interesting. Even in his earliest novels, his women characters are

pictured not as passive human beings but as active individuals being ready to act and standing up to challenging situations. Florence, Deborah, Esther and Elizabeth, for example, are depicted as thinking and passionate women in *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, particularly Florence being portrayed as a very strong character in the novel who rebels against the injustice and suffocation of sexual role definition and double standard followed in the society and in her house. She rebels against all the care and attention paid by her mother to her brother Gabriel simply because he is male child and that she is denied education because she is a female child. Her rebellion culminates in leaving home under her mother's death bed curse to go north, never to return and to seek her future in the much promised land.

James Baldwin was shaped by the age in which he lived, the turbulent middle years of the twentieth century. Harlem, at the time he was born, was known to the Whites in America as a place fit only for jazz entertainers and its numerous night clubs. It was the only path blacks could pursue to success at that time. But with Baldwin's publication of *Notes of a Native Son* and *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, the whole scenario changed. It made the Black's to be seen as a more serious entity than being just entertainers. This great turn around was achieved by the exemplary performance of countless successful young blacks like Baldwin who appeared as black intellectual symbols. Baldwin by his brilliant writing shook the conscience of white Americans. He reached the attention of the audiences that had never been reached before by a black artist.

James Baldwin was not only an artist, but also an activist. His novels, stories and essays not only reflected the currents of American life, but also influenced them. He has left his mark upon his generation through his vehement and strong views in his writings. His bitter struggle during his boyhood, suffering the pain of being black and poor in America, and at the same time supporting young brothers and sisters in Harlem, living under the strains of a dubious religious system that was obscurantist, and himself undergoing a religious conversion only to walk out of it at his own discovery of the fact that God was 'white' and was no supporter of Blacks – his involvement in the Civil Rights Activities, have yielded brilliant fruit in the passion and humanity of his work.

James Baldwin's writings spread over a period of around forty years from 1947 to his death in 1987 form a kind of repetition of his themes, ideas and beliefs. There is a growth in his views and dealings of his nuclear ideas and beliefs to deal honestly, realistically and positively with the social life of the nation and world around him with its hopes and despairing defeats. His early life in Harlem, the oppression he faced, and the oppression he overcame gave him an enormous strength to fight a battle royal with oppressive forces. The religious conversion he underwent, the stone-front churches of Harlem and his experience as a boy-preacher and his subsequent leaving the church never to return to it again have all had a great influence on his beliefs and writings.

James Baldwin's life in Paris in self-exile also bore a great influence on him. He discovered that he was not unwanted in France. Wherever he went, he was not looked down upon as being 'a Black man'. Here was a country which did not differentiate people on the basis of one's colour. He wanted this to happen in America. He believed and hoped that America would one day become a country free from the color problem and where the whites and Blacks could live together in harmony and in equality. He felt that it was his life's mission to achieve this goal or to participate in the efforts to reach this goal. He used his intellectualism, his writings and oratorical skill towards this mission in life. He tried his best to achieve this mission not by confrontation but by conciliatory methods, so much and so he rejected the protest form of literature and broke with Richard Wright, the foremost in Black protest literature and whom he considered his literary father. Baldwin, denying the effectiveness of protest fiction, believed in love, the kind of love that cuts across race, color, country or sex-as the redeemer of mankind. To him, Love was the only redemptive force that could save mankind from danger and disaster.

James Baldwin became disillusioned in the 1960's when the country underwent the racial turmoil during the desegregation in the south. He was frustrated by the developments and also found an increasing determination to fight against racial inequality. Through his active role in the Civil Rights Movement, Baldwin met Attorney General Robert Kennedy and held parleys on racial issues. He was the guest of honour at the celebration of Kenya's independence. Awards and honours for his literary and social activity came to him one after another. By his writings, Baldwin shook the conscience of the county and woke up the people to reality and truth. His mission is that his soul would rest in peace when even minute trace of racism ceases to exist in America. He believed that the key to end the colour problem was Love. He said that the blacks survived in America through the hoary days of slavery and beyond only because of the love they had for one another.

"If we had not loved each other none of us would have survived. And now you must survive because we love you, and for the sake of your children and your children's children" (Fire Next Time 21)

James Baldwin's philosophy of domestic love and community love resting on direct action as the key for survival and emancipation of the Blacks of America stand vindicated by the mothers in the novels of Baldwin. It is a great tribute to motherhood. Elizabeth in *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and Sharon Rivers in *If Beale St. Could Talk* are mothers of whom the women all over the world can be proud of and the children the world over would wish to have as mothers. Baldwin loved his mother very much, probably this togetherness in ugliness bound Jimmy in love with his mother. He was very much devoted to her, he grew up helping her as she brought each of her children into the world, feeling and changing them, using one hand to support a baby and the other to hold a book. He always stood by her side helping her

in her household chores and running errands for her and he went to the extent of describing his mother as “a very tough title woman” (Baldwin’s interview, 80).

The strong influences on Baldwin’s writings were his own family, the Harlem ghetto, its squalid surroundings. His wide reading, which included the Bible, Charles Dickens, Harriet Beecher Stowe and R.L. Stevenson. His religious conversion at the age of fourteen to being junior preacher at a Pentecostal church, helped him keep off the streets and bore a great influence of the King James Bible and the storefront church. The experience of his religious conversion and his own family, his whimsical father, his loving mother and all those brothers and sisters thread their way in Baldwin’s first novel, *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1953). He has to his credit publication of such novels as 1. *Another Country* (1962). 2. *Tell Me How Long the Train’s been Gone* (1968), 3. *If Beale Street could Talk* (1974) and 4. *Just Above My Head* (1979), with a focus on fight of blacks, the need for the Blacks to come together in oneness to fight white oppression, love, hope, death, fight against all oppressive and terrifying forces etc. However much Baldwin gave vent to his anti-white repression and anti-God sentiments in his novels and essays, Baldwin was hopeful that America would one day reconcile to the color problem and racism would cease to exist. In May of 1979, receiving an honorary doctor of letters degree at Morehouse College, Atlanta, Georgia, Baldwin expressed his belief that, in fact, change had taken place in his lifetime and that the future held hope:

“When I was born, black’s generally were born trapped into a white man’s fantasy, Black children are not trapped into a White man’s fantasy now ... I feel a great wheel turning. This has never been a white country and the truth is coming out. Blacks have always been a part of this country but the country was never able to accept that. But we are flesh of the flesh, bone of the bone. And we will triumph “ (Pratt 28).

James Baldwin’s life and work has been a significant contribution to the ultimate triumph in life. His achievement lay in his portrayal of real-life characters for he excelled in the portrayal of women characters. His love for his mother, his observation of the sacrifices. Black women make for the sake of the family have had an indelible impression on James Baldwin and he has paid rich tributes to these sacrificing women in his novels. Interestingly enough, when it comes to the portrayal of man-women relationship also, Baldwin’s women always show greater personal and worldly insight. More than this, the woman is often more aggressive, more intelligent, and more successful – she is stronger than her man. So in *Another Country* Leona shows more perspective love than Rufus. Cass Silenski out steps Richard in intellectual and perspective quality and the black Ida Scott dominates the white

Italian Vivaldo Moore with her long-learned knack of managing the world. The fact that James Baldwin's works are notable for their strong, sensitively explored female characters is best proved in his novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974). This novel attempts a first person narrative by a nineteen year old uneducated, unmarried black female, Clementine Rivers, known as Tish. Tish is pregnant, her lover Atonzo Hunt known as Fonny is in jail, falsely implicated in a rape case by a black – hating racist white cop. Tish though young and uneducated works hard and 'stands like a rock to get Fonny out of jail. Fonny's mother and sisters show no love and interest to get Fonny out of jail – they curse Tish for getting him into trouble. But Tish runs from pillar to post, pays the white lawyer – works overtime to raise the money for costs, meets Fonny periodically in jail, consoles and comforts him, encourages him and assures him that he will be out of jail soon.

Sharon Rivers, Tish's mother emerges as another strong woman with great will in the novel. She understands her daughters' pre-marital pregnancy, her love for Fonny and the efforts she puts up to get him out of jail. She sets out bravely alone to Puerto Rico to meet Mrs. Rogers, the Puerto Rican woman who was supposed to have been raped by Fonny. There in Puerto Rico she pleads with her to save Fonny. Sharon Rivers is presented not only as an ideal woman willing to act in times of crisis but also as an idealized mother who will go to all extents to free her daughter and her daughter's love from trouble. Another great example of an active woman ready to spring to action in times of need is Ernestine Rivers, Tish's sister. She acts as a nurturer and a protector for Tish. It is she who looks after Tish with great care, works hard to raise more money for the case and ceaselessly works for the happiness of her sister, not only because she is her sister but also because she is just another black woman born to sufferer. Ernestine is an activist, an untiring worker. She is street-wise and also politically conscious. Her mind and heart reflect the commitment that guides her life. In her active approach towards life, she is outside the church and influence of God. She refuses to be guided by the church or God, the traditional influence on Black Americans who having nothing else to hold, cling on to God and church. She refuses to stand by and hope that things will get better on their own or by God's help. She takes matters into her own hands as often as she can Ernestine definitely emerges as a very strong woman in the novel.

Almost all the roles in which we find black women in Baldwin's fiction are traditional ones – mothers, sisters, lovers, wives – and almost all of them are roles of support for the male characters. Baldwin has a great understanding of the black women characters, those women in his real life serving as role models. As sisters – Ida Scott is memorable in *Another Country*. She comes into the novel with a purpose to wreak vengeance for her brother Rufus Scott's death and succeeds in it. Aunt Florence in *Go Tell it on the Mountain* is a sister in contrast. For lovers, we have the great examples of Elizabeth in *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and Clementine rivers (Tist) in *If Beale Street Could Talk*. The mothers in James Baldwin's novels are an oppressed lot. Their sufferings have no limit, they are burdened with family duties, irresponsible husbands, children who threaten to fall out of the family, besides which they undergo all the poverty and other constraints of a Black family. But the beauty lies in the

amidst these extremely adverse circumstances, the mothers rise up like phoenix, not only to protect the family, but also to make it prosper. Whatever happens in life, the greatness in these mothers is that they never fail in their duties as mothers. They are pictured as the ones fighting relentlessly to hold the family together to see to the welfare of the children, their husbands and their families. The women depicted by Baldwin in his fiction are brave, intelligent, outstanding in their behavior and above all – all ready to act. Commenting on the role of women in the novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Trudier says:

“If the novel moves its focus away from characters who are inside the church, or who have grown up in it, to characters who have consistently rejected its influence on their lives” (P 128).

An active liberated mother is portrayed in the novel *If Beale Street could Talk* paying a great tribute to womanhood or motherhood in all respects.

To conclude, the mothers or women characters stand out in great honour and grandeur in that they spare no effort in saving their children and their families even as all the forces on the earth are opposed to them.

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