

Giovanni's Room and Another Country: A Study of Modern Struggles with Loneliness, Alienation and Isolation

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Abstract

Loneliness, alienation, and isolation are recurrent themes in James Baldwin's work. His novels explore how individuals are estranged from themselves and others due to societal pressures, personal identity conflicts, and the personal dynamics of love and friendship. Baldwin's novels are mostly written from a male perspective, and the male characters live in a disturbed world. In a study by Halim & Sultan (2023), "modern man claims to be socially connected and views the world as a global village where one can connect with the other with the click of a button." However, when we explore a person's deep emotions and urges, we see that the desire to connect with others remains the same. *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and *Another Country* (1962) present characters who struggle with their loneliness to find stability in their world. Giovanni, David, Rufus, and Eric are examples of such disturbed, lonely characters, and their struggles with their identities and the desire to meet societal expectations reveal the profound impact of alienation on their lives and relationships. This paper compares the characters in *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country* and investigates why and how they suffer from loneliness, alienation, and isolation.

Keywords: alienation, Baldwin, identities, loneliness, modern, society, struggles

Introduction

The concepts of alienation, loneliness, and isolation play a dominant role in contemporary works. According to *the New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, alienation indicates "a sense of estrangement from society, a feeling of powerlessness to effect social change and the depersonalization of the individual" (Bullock & Trombley 55). In other words, when a person feels emotionally, physically, and socially disconnected from the world or people around him, he is considered to be struggling with loneliness, alienation, and isolation. It is a traumatic experience for a human being when, despite living among a multitude of people, he cannot connect with the people around him. Alienation is a major theme of the human condition in the contemporary epoch, and the alienated protagonist is a recurrent figure. Hence, there are serious attempts to sketch the confusion, frustration, alienation, disintegration, and estrangement of modern man (Saleem 75).

Contemporary literature has explored the themes of loneliness, isolation, and alienation to a great extent, as modern man struggles with existential issues and quests for self-knowledge and self-identity. Alienated figures are common in most modern fiction. The protagonists are misfits either because of some defects in their character or nature, or because of the society in which they live. It shows that men are reluctant to discuss emotional issues, which creates barriers to forming healthy relationships (Halim & Sultan, 2023). In *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country*, the characters fear being alone. They are desperately running into each other's arms in search of company, irrespective of their age, race, color, or sexual identity. Yet the desperate, temporary nature of their relationship only complicates matters, leaving the characters more depressed and lonelier. Infidelity, lies, and deception lead to greater isolation and a failure to form a true bond. The essay by Gibson III states that "*Giovanni's Room* continues a Baldwinian journey into the nuances of male intimacy and vulnerability. Fraternal crisis abounds within it..." (61).

However, a large part of the novel focuses on the characters' feelings of loneliness and emptiness. Baldwin's characters are seen as marginalized exiles, alienated and despairing, and this shows the novel's move towards otherness as characters temporarily inhabit it. It is significant that these characters are presented as outcasts. As Gibson III states, "Baldwin's novel continues to reveal the pervasiveness of the author's preoccupation with loneliness" (62). The story is centered around love, identity, loneliness, and the struggle to meet societal expectations that ultimately prevent people from accepting themselves (Raina 221). The hollowness that a person feels inside governs Baldwin's characters throughout the novel. They are lost, confused, torn between conflicts and dilemmas, and struggle to identify themselves in this lonely modern world. American literature that emerged post-World War II presented the existentialist's plight, and characters such as David and Giovanni in *Giovanni's Room* and Rufus and Eric in *Another Country* represent the emptiness and hollowness within man.

Theoretical Background

In a study by Taylor et al. (2023), loneliness is defined as a perceived/subjective condition in which an individual is dissatisfied with the quality and quantity of their social relationships. Social isolation is seen as a condition characterized by a lack of contact with other people and disengagement. Being alone or isolated comes to us only when we see ourselves devoid of close

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relationships or detached from others. According to Hawkley & Cacioppo (2010), humans depend on secure and social surroundings to thrive as a social species. When a man feels isolated or lonely, he needs to connect to others due to the perceived threats. People can live relatively solitary lives and not feel lonely, and conversely, they can live an ostensibly rich social life and feel lonely nevertheless. A study by Saleem (2014) states that alienation is a major theme of the human condition in the contemporary epoch. Therefore, the themes of alienation, loneliness, and isolation have been dealt with differently by various writers in modern literature.

When it comes to presenting alienation, isolation, and loneliness in the works of James Baldwin, the presentation is no exception. “A normal black child, having grown up with a normal family, will become abnormal at the slightest contact with the white world,” (Frantz Fanon 122). Hence, the characters in both *Another Country* and *Giovanni’s Room* symbolize loneliness in white society. In Baldwin’s novel, characters like Rufus experience shame, self-hatred, and emotional paralysis because of racism, sexuality, and social expectations. These emotions give rise to internal conflict and psychological fragmentation. According to Hoffman (n.d), “Loneliness is an emotional—and sometimes cognitive—discomfort occurring as a consequence of perceiving oneself as being alone or separated from others. One can experience loneliness even when around others.”

Significance of the Study

In the novels *Giovanni’s Room* and *Another Country*, Baldwin explores the identity of the characters in psychological depth in different contexts in the mid-20th century- a period of significant social change. Mid-20th-century fiction explored issues of alienation and existentialism. Influenced by existential philosophy, writers portrayed characters who struggled with a sense of purposelessness in a chaotic world. The characters and themes are set against this backdrop because Baldwin’s portrayal of alienation and isolation reflects the historical context of racial and sexual tensions. The writers during this time often presented the complexity and disorientation of modern life. The characters in these two novels exhibit psychological complexity, revealing how alienation and isolation affect their emotional well-being. Each character is lonely in his own way and seeks his identity and the meaning of life.

Research Question

Therefore, the researchers have formulated the following research question.

1. How and why do the characters in *Giovanni’s Room* and *Another Country* suffer from loneliness, alienation, and isolation?

Analyzing the causes of loneliness, alienation, and isolation among the characters in *Giovanni’s Room*

In the novel, the protagonist, David, is presented as a handsome young man in his mid-twenties living in Paris. He comes from a privileged background with a caring family, and David tries to maintain a good, stable relationship with his father. However, he is not acceptable in society because he does not meet societal expectations of what it means to be a man. He is presented as a bisexual man, but he tries to convince himself that he is neither homosexual nor bisexual. His identity sets him apart from other men in society who fulfill the social requirements of manhood. He comes to Paris, which can be interpreted as his escape to a new and unknown place where he

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has much more freedom than he had in America. In Paris, he falls in love with Giovanni, whom he cannot resist. David's loneliness is deeply connected to his internal conflict regarding his sexual identity. In his younger days, he was afraid of his feelings for his onetime partner, Joey, as they would confirm his sexual identity and possibly cause him to become ostracized from a large part of society, including his own family and friends. However, he does not attempt to continue his relationship with Joey and convinces himself that he will forget the incident of their intimacy. As a man, the same kind of escapism and fleeting nature is present in him. He is torn between his feelings for Giovanni and his wishes to be a normal man in the eyes of society. This internal struggle creates a profound sense of isolation as he grapples with his true self versus the identity he feels pressured to maintain. He agrees to marry Hella, but it seems he does so to meet societal expectations. At the beginning of the novel, while he stands in front of the mirror, he recalls his promise to Hella, thinking, "I told her that I loved her once, and I made myself believe it" (*Giovanni's Room* 5). He continues, "I suppose this was why I asked her to marry me, to give myself something to be moored to" (5). He admits to himself that he was, "Wearied of the joyless seas of alcohol, wearied of the blunt, bluff, hearty and totally meaningless friendships, wearied of wandering through the forests of desperate women..." (*Giovanni's Room* 21).

This is the plight of many men in today's society, where individuals feel increasingly detached and disconnected from others. It is evident that David had been living an obscure and meaningless life to hide his identity. This is also one of the reasons why he decided to marry. His fear of societal judgment and rejection deepens his loneliness, as he feels he must hide his true self to fit conventional expectations. He also tries to deceive Hella by deciding to maintain two relationships simultaneously—one with Hella and the other with Giovanni. Hence, Baldwin illustrates David's social alienation by analyzing the process of his self-exploration and his questions on origin and identity.

On the other hand, Giovanni is presented as a contrast to the kind of life and privileges David has enjoyed. When he came to Paris, without money or a worker's permit, he could not support himself until he met Guillaume, who gave him a job as a server at his bar in exchange for various sexual favors. David meets Giovanni for the first time in the bar. His magnetic personality draws David in and contrasts sharply with David's more conflicted, self-contained nature, and later that night they become intimate in Giovanni's room. David is deeply charmed by Giovanni, but he still has reservations about their relationship. In the latter part of the novel, when he gets fired from the bar and is accused of being a thief, he tells David he would be totally lost without him.

Giovanni's freedom and romantic idealism had drawn David toward him—something he found both alluring and threatening. However, when Giovanni loses his job, he becomes increasingly vulnerable and dependent on David, which David cannot accept. David had escaped from his previous relationships, and he does the same with Giovanni. Despite his outward confidence, Giovanni's character is deeply vulnerable. His relationship with David and subsequent downfall exposes his fragility and the emotional cost of his experiences. His love for David is genuine to some extent. However, David's fleeting nature and lack of confidence, indecisiveness at various stages of his life, and his desire to meet societal expectations lead to a tragic end to Giovanni's life.

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Analyzing the causes of loneliness, isolation, and alienation among the characters in *Another Country*

The novel *Another Country* presents characters who are marginalized, and alienated. Throughout the novel, the characters struggle to overcome their isolation in a hostile society. Rufus is a Black man in a predominantly White, racially prejudiced society in which he faces systemic racism and social exclusion. This isolation is both a result of and a contributor to his loneliness. He is also estranged from his family. There is a lack of understanding among the family members.

Moreover, his internal loathing of himself contributes to his alienation, which creates barriers for him to connect to others. There are people in the novel, like Vivaldo and Leona, who reach out to him to befriend him, but he fails to respond to any healthy or long-lasting relationships. In a conversation with Vivaldo, Leona says, "I know he is sick and I keep hoping he'll get well and I can't make him see a doctor" (*Another Country*, p.46).

This is most evident in Rufus's character when Baldwin writes at the beginning of the novel that while coming out of the movies, Rufus thinks of going to Vivaldo, "the only friend he had left in the city, or maybe in the whole world" (*Another Country*, p.1). Moments before his death, Rufus recalls his relationship with Eric and feels his loneliness. He formed an intimate relationship with Eric, only to despise him more, which made Eric leave him. His efforts to bridge the gap between himself and others often result in disappointment, reinforcing his sense of being alone. Rufus finds himself in a world that has no meaning and no power. Rufus's suicide can be seen as simply one link in a long chain of untimely tragedies that defined black life during the Jim Crow era (Premnath, & Udhayakumar (2021). As Gibson III states, "this reflects how nihilism has consumed his being- there is no hope, no order, no reason- it has been replaced by suffering" (126). Rufus is unable to make sense of or survive the racial intolerance that has made him homeless. This isolation is both a result of and a contributor to his loneliness. He is also estranged from his family. There is a lack of understanding among the family members.

Having suffered for long years without any healing turns him into an insensitive man who even fails to see or accept anything good from anyone. In addition, just before his death, when he is tired and lonely on the streets of New York City, not a soul comes to save him. He is left alone in the world, where he can see no other solution to his problem but to jump off the bridge.

As Gibson III writes, his loneliness is the result of his struggles with racism: it is due to social environment that is intolerant of his blackness (109). Rufus feels disconnected and rejected from the very land he calls home, which led to his tragic death. His loneliness and alienation are a complex interplay of social, familial, emotional, and psychological factors that contribute to his profound sense of isolation throughout the novel.

On the other hand, though Eric comes from a good family and is privileged because of his race and background, he is portrayed as a lonely character from an early age, leading him to take an interest in the Black servants in his household. His loneliness reflects his struggles and the broader social context of the world. He is estranged from his own identity and suffers from emotional detachment from the people around him. Moreover, strained relationships and unfulfilled desires deepen his alienation. His loneliness also reflects an existential crisis. He grapples with feelings of meaninglessness and despair, questioning his place in the world and the

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value of his relationships. This existential struggle deepens his sense of isolation. Even the people that he forms relationships with are lonely, depressed, and unhappy like him. In a conversation with Yves, he convinces him to stay by saying, "I'm all by myself, I've got no one to talk to..." (175). It is the same kind of loneliness he felt as a child. Baldwin writes, " When he was little, he had been very much alone for his mother was a civic leader..." (159). This detachment from his parents had isolated him from his family to such an extent that he began to find solace in the company of the Black servants in his house, especially Henry. Hence, Eric's lonely childhood significantly shapes his character and personality as he grows up. He is on his own, finding himself in a lonely world.

Discussion

Loneliness, alienation, and isolation are central themes in modernist literature, reflecting the era's deep concerns about individual existence, societal changes, and the fragmentation of traditional structures. Studies of modern fiction show that people struggle toward individual self-fulfillment outside their societies. The characters are presented to the reader in some unfamiliar method of self-revelation (Drew 20). Modernist literature explores issues with questions of identity and the self, reflecting the fragmented and multifaceted nature of modern existence. Baldwin's exploration of characters like Giovanni, David, Rufus, and Eric is a true representation of the fragmented society in which they live, which shapes their characters and personalities. The characters in both novels suffer from profound isolation from society and themselves. They struggle to find the meaning of life throughout their existence.

It is noteworthy that Baldwin shows characters from both the poor and the neglected class, as well as from the privileged class. Rufus is Black and is rejected in society, having a derogatory position and image. In exploring his condition and the traumas or injustices he goes through, readers can relate all these to his background. The alienation of black males results from black people's confusion, distortion, and loss under racial discrimination and gender oppression (Yan 9). This is seen in the presentation of Rufus. One can see why he has to offer sexual favors in exchange for money. Because of his color, he is not accepted in society. He is neglected, which makes him long for "both investment and visibility" (Gibson III 104). As Martinez writes, Rufus Scott commits suicide due to his deep-seated loneliness and desperation (782). He is presented as someone who hates himself for who he is and what he is. However, the readers wonder why someone like Eric suffers from a similar kind of alienation. His longing to connect with people around him makes it evident that, irrespective of age, race, family, or background, modern man struggles with identity, detachment, and emotional distance from others. He is no better than Rufus and jumps from one relationship to another for comfort and solace. He also has no long-term relationship with any of his partners. Hence, we come to know that social forces play a large role in shaping his personality (Martinez 788).

On the other hand, in *Giovanni's Room*, neither Giovanni nor David is black. However, these characters have their battles to fight. Like Rufus, Giovanni's background and social condition tell the readers why he offers sexual favors in exchange for money. He is a jobless expatriate in Paris. At the same time, he experiences a conflict between his desires and the expectations imposed upon him. However, David is in a much better social position than Giovanni. Like Eric in *Another Country*, he grapples with his true identity and tries to hide it from others. As a result,

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he is confused, traumatized, and lost. The emotional scars from past experiences, including personal loss and the impact of societal oppression, contribute to his loneliness and difficulty in forming meaningful relationships. He prefers a deceitful relationship even after marriage. He wants to be sure he is safe from both sides. In a sense, he assures himself that he is not lonely in the long run. He does not realize that he is only deceiving himself by betraying others. Hence, in the novel, his experiences involve personal betrayal and the painful journey of discovering and accepting his true self amidst societal and personal challenges.

However, it can be inferred that characters like Rufus in *Another Country* and Giovanni in *Giovanni's Room* give up their struggle and throw themselves into a world from which there is no turning back. Their individual experiences of alienation and loneliness remind readers of the emotional toll of living an inauthentic life and the deep-seated need for acceptance and connection. They live a meaningless life and ultimately give up on life before it is time. On the other hand, characters like David and Eric discover themselves in a positive way. In his futile attempt to maintain two relationships simultaneously, Eric fails to keep even one and, at the end of the novel, is left alone. It might be because he realizes he cannot be true to anyone or stay committed to anyone. However, Eric is better than David in this regard. He finally decided on the relationship he wanted and with whom. According to some scholars, Eric symbolizes "a vehicle for reconciliation." He can take a stand for himself. His decision to stay in a single relationship reminds the readers that humans human beings crave to bond with one another. Eric longs for a stable relationship and finds one with Yves.

Hence, it addresses the research question that in both novels the characters go through traumatic experiences being lonely and crave human connections.

Conclusion

Wood (2005) describes alienation as "a psychological or social evil, characterized by one or another type of harmful separation, disruption or fragmentation, which sunders things that belong together" (p. 21). Moreover, in modern fiction, the protagonists are misfits because of defects in their nature or character, or because of the society in which they live. Baldwin's major characters suffer from a most profound isolation, alienation, and estrangement. This becomes too heavy to bear, and they search for solace in the power of love (Premnath & Udhayakumar, 2021). They all struggle to find themselves, a stable position, and meaningful relationships in society. Even when people are among many, loneliness and alienation haunt the modern man (Halim & Sultan 660).

Most struggle to cope with their disturbed conditions, while others may give up on life itself. Hence, this paper has shown how and why Baldwin's characters, like Giovanni, David, Rufus, and Eric, become victims of alienation in this world. Through them, Baldwin represents the conflicts and struggles of every modern man. He vividly portrays their feelings of disconnection from society, each other, and themselves. His novels *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country* offer psychological insight into their characters, highlighting the modernist preoccupation with the individual's inner world and the quest to find meaning in a rapidly changing world.

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