

The Criterion

December 2012

ISSN 0976-8165

Vol. III. Issue IV

An International Journal in English

Quarterly Refereed and Indexed Open Access Journal

Editor-In-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com

criterionejournal@gmail.com

Portrayal of Black Survivors in Unjust and Racist White World in James Baldwin's Selected Novels: *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Just Above My Head*

J.Yogavinotha

Assistant Professor of English
S.F.R College, Sivakasi

You can handcuff my wrists, and shackle my feet.
You can bind me in chains; throw me in your deepest
darkest dungeon... But you can't enslave my thinking...
for it is free like the wind.

- Jaye Swift

As Jaye Swift's statement in his recent novel *But You Can't Enslave My Thinking* (2010), nobody can suppress the intellectual flourishing of the Blacks who are from Africa and now has become or attempted to become the native of the American soil. African-American literature is the existing example for the creative thinking and intelligence of the black Americans.

James Arthur Baldwin emerged as one of America's most gifted writers and one of the black America's most articulate spokesmen. He became one of the leading African-American authors of his generation, known for his works that tackled black and white relationship and quest for black identity in American white society.

James Baldwin's acclaimed novels are *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *Giovanni's Room* (1956), *Another Country* (1962), *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) and *Just Above My Head* (1979). In his fictions, he explores the implications of racism for both the oppressed and the oppressor, suggesting repeatedly that Whites as well as Blacks suffer in a racist climate. He writes of inner turmoil and spiritual disruption of the people living in this harsh, selfish and hypocrite American world.

Black survivors in the American soil suffer a lot by the racial attitude of Whites. The condition of the untouchables in India, the rough treatment meted out to them in the past, the sociological and religious segregation are similar to the sufferings of the American Negroes. The African-American are suppressed in social, political, economic and judicial levels. In Baldwin's novels, *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Just Above My Head*, the black characters represent the common black survivors' lives.

Baldwin portrays the black man's oppressed life in unjust and unkind American society in his novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*. This novel follows the unpleasant experience of a young black couple. The protagonist Fonny and his lady love Tish lead a challenging life in the hostile land of America. They, only because of being blacks, become the victims of the unjust American judicial system. This young couple who is exploited by the unjust American system of justice, is forced to survive a life in utter depression and frustration.

Fonny, the protagonist represents the suffering Blacks under unjust society whereas, the white policeman Bell the antagonist represents the unkind American judicial system. Fonny and Tish's live life is intruded by the police officer Bell. It is white, racist Bell who stands for white power and oppression exercised through American system of justice. Baldwin presents Bell as a representative of crude, inquisitive white power which spells physical and spiritual oppression for the Blacks.

Baldwin in a subtle manner has expressed his anger and dismay over judicial miscarriage through the incident involving false indictment of Fonny as a rapist. Baldwin brings out very effectively all the elements of blatant injustice: the racist policeman, officer Bell, who needs a black rape suspect, the black youth Fonny, who is conveniently arrested and sent to jail without bond, and a deliberate and calculated move by white policeman to use law for conviction of an innocent black victim.

Tish, Fonny's fiancé is portrayed as a comforting and supporting soul to Fonny, while she herself is doubly discriminated as a black citizen of white America and a black woman in the black community. Even though she was left alone to save the life of her lover, the members of her family lend their helping hands to her in their unique ways. It represents the need of communal bond among the members of an oppressed minority. After a long time battle with the unjust society, Tish at last is able to bring out Fonny on bail.

Baldwin, even though, stresses the human bondage that exists within the black community to lead a safe and secured life in the imperial and racist society, he also recognizes the deep, universal bonds of emotions that tie the hearts of people regardless of their colour of skin. Baldwin in *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Baldwin attempts to discover New America where the black citizens will be free from the injustice meted out to them.

In *Just Above My Head*, James Baldwin boldly expresses the African-American family life in the United States under blatant racism. He describes racism as a catalyst which generates violence, loss of faith, suffering and redemption in the black community. He demonstrates racism and its consequence which is encountered by all the characters in the novel.

Just Above My Head revolves around the lives of two black families: Montanas and Millers. Paul Montana and Florence Montana are the successful black parents who guide their sons Hall Montana and Arthur Montana through adolescence to lead a better life in the American soil. Joel Miller and Amy Miller are the examples who are victimized by racism and fail to lend a safety ground to their children Julia Miller and Jimmy Miller in the white society. The family of Millers exemplifies the impact of racism under which number of black families suffers from lack of education and economic resources. Throughout the novel, Montanas help Millers as family friends to overcome their pain and abusive background.

Arthur, the young singer, wants to escape from the racist American soil. He has left the dirty, difficult streets of New York, where his skin, hair, eyes and nose enforce him to feel like alien. He leaves for Paris where if he is not exactly an invisible man. Arthur attempts to relieve himself from the isolation which is the result of confronted racism by having homosexual relationships. Even Arthur becomes uncomfortable with his romantic relationship, fearing the judgement of those who might oppose it. Arthur becomes increasingly sorrowful, drowning his sorrows in alcohol and drugs. His death in the men's room in the basement of a London pub is only an adverse physical reaction to too much alcohol. Arthur's death might be described as an explosion of sorrow and isolation. Racism, meted out to Arthur leads him to demise.

Julia indirectly suffers under racism that her father, Joel Miller confronted. National racism provides a context for understanding how someone like Joel Miller is formed in the black community. During the preaching days of his daughter Julia, he lives as one insanely mad with his daughter's divine calling. He stands unconcerned, not only about the neglect and oppression of his son Jimmy, but also about the oppression surrounding his own life as a black man in racist society. Joel adopts the roles of devoted father, stage manager and holy witness to Julia's sermons.

After the death of Julia's mother, Amy when Julia decides to leave the pulpit, Joel's true feeling of the human inadequacy and worthlessness surface as he becomes unhealthy dependant upon Julia emotionally and financially. Joel becomes bitterly mad, seeing everything and everyone, especially his daughter, as conspiring to keep him down. Julia's unwillingness to return to the pulpit increases his anger and he begins to sexually assault her regularly. Julia suffers under forced incest-relationship with her uncared and unkind father. She seeks healing and reconciliation for her fragmented life in love and sympathy.

Racial discrimination distort the past, present and future of black Americans in America. The lives of Blacks have always been sharply conditioned by white patriarchal society and the system of slavery. Racism continues to haunt the Blacks and even among them that there are distinctions between light coloured and dark coloured. Subjected to severe brutality of racism and sexism, the Blacks are tormented in all respects beyond description. All these consequences and impact of racism are best illustrated in *Just Above My Head* through the real lives of Blacks in the white American Society.

This article firmly states that each and every character in Baldwin's novel is affected by the issue of being marked as "other" in the unkind and unjust American society. Both novels *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Just Above My Head* clearly depict the self-exiled condition of Blacks who are excluded from the main stream of American life. Baldwin moves from the mere personal and individual questions towards the problems which have wider social implications. With his values of courage, fairness, honesty, compassion of knowing humanity and reality, James Baldwin in his novels looks for complexity and recognition of human pain. Baldwin asks his readers to truly listen to and comprehend the stories of individuals who survive US racism outside the nation's geographical boundaries.

Works Cited:

- Baldwin, James. *If Beale Street Could Talk*. New York: Vintage Books, 1974.
 ---. *Just Above My Head*. New York: The Dial Press, 1979.
 Carson, Warren J. "Manhood, Musicality, and Male Bonding in *Just Above My*
 -Miller. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2000. 215-232.
 Garrett, Daniel. "James Baldwin, An Honest Man, and A Good Writer, Who
 Made the Unseen Visible". *James Baldwin Now*. Ed. Dwight McBride. New
 York: New York University Press, 1999.
 Gibson, Donald B. "James Baldwin: The Political Anatomy of Space." *The*
Politics of Literary Expression: A Study of Major Black Writers. Weestport, CT:
 Greenwood Press, 1981.
 Harris, Trudier. *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin*. Knoxville:
 University of Tennessee Press, 1985.
 Hassan, Ihab. "The Characters of Post-war Fiction in America". *Cotemporary*

- Literature. Ed. Richard Kostelanetz. New York: New York University Press, 1964.
- Jeskova, Joanna. "Incestuous Violence and Brotherly Love in James Baldwin's *Just Above My Head*." *Obsidian: Literature in the African Diaspora* 9.2 (2008): 77+. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 23 Nov. 2011.
<<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA235633545&v=2.1&u=wash89460&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>>
- Kinnamon, Keneth, ed. *James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1991.
- Lee, Robert A. *James Baldwin: Claiming to the Light*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.
- McBride, Dwight A., ed. *James Baldwin Now*. New York: New York University Press, 1999.
- Norman, Brian. "James Baldwin's confrontation with US imperialism in *If Beale Street Could Talk*." *MELUS* 32.1 (2007): 119+. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 16 Nov. 2011.
<<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA164423124&v=2.1&u=wash89460&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>>
- O'Daniel, Therman B., ed. *James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation*. Washington: Howard University Press, 1977.
- Roberts, John W. "James (Arthur) Baldwin." *Afro-American Fiction Writers After 1955*. Ed. Thadious M. Davis and Trudier Harris-Lopez. Detroit: Gale Research, 1984. *Dictionary of Literary Biography* Vol. 33. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 16 Nov. 2011.
<<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1200000023&v=2.1&u=wash89460&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>>
- Standley, Fred L., and Nancy V. Burt, eds. *Critical Essays on James Baldwin*. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co, 1988.
- , and Louis H. Pratt, eds. *Conversations with James Baldwin*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989.
- Swift, Jaye. *But You Can't Enslave My Thinking*. Canada: Trafford Publishing, 2010.
- Warren, Nagueyalti. "The substance of things hoped for: faith in *Go Tell It On The Mountain* and *Just Above My Head*." *Obsidian II* 7.1-2 (1992): 19+. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 16 Nov. 2011.
<<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA205735003&v=2.1&u=wash89460&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>>
- Young, James O., ed. *Black Writers of the Thirties*. Boston: Louisiana State University Press, 1973.