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## Elemental Racism and Transgressive Sexuality in James Baldwin's *Another Country*

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### Abstract:

Afro-American writings of the last fifty years have captured an immense popularity and seminally opinionated attention across the scholars worldwide. As opposed to the idea of an exotic and uncivilized blackness, the new 'American misfits' are transformed into psychologically disfigured products accounting for their own experiential identities. James Baldwin's novel 'Another Country' bears a similar testimony towards this black representativeness in terms of both anti-normative sexuality and racial dichotomies. Therefore, the objective of the present research is to examine the construction of black experience and how it is capable of either dehumanizing oneself or stirring rebellion against racial hierarchies prevalent in the American subcontinent. Furthermore, this paper will also take into account, the reactionary idealism of the white folk whose innocence to act as benefactors towards blacks will be debased and condemned to the very core. In short, the need of the hour is to demythify the idea of egalitarianism and realize the ongoing racial differences between the two races. A deep study probing into the sexual orientation of various characters along with the author itself will provide yet another significant edge to this research. Altogether, the paper will efficiently trace the various shortcomings of the segregated twentieth century America and only 'Another country' can provide a fresh ray of hope to its queer and misguided characters.

**Keywords:** blackness, identity, anti-normative, racial, experience, dehumanizing, rebellion idealism, innocence,

'There's thousands of people, ain't got no place to go  
Cause my house fell and I can't live there no mo'

(Jameson 38)

Bessie Smith's heart throbbing blues poignantly describe the existential pensiveness of Rufus Scott, the black melancholic protagonist of Baldwin's controversial yet outrageously honest novel 'Another Country'. The sardonically characterized black

queer, though dead right in the first part perpetually reappears in the form of consciously persistent memories thereby accentuating an introspective profoundness of thoughts and emotions in order to emphasize the black experience in the paradigmatically white America. In short, the other characters of the novel time and again are haunted by the onerous suicide committed by Rufus in order to further a psychologically complex study of the potentialities and responsibilities of their own selves as well as the severe plight of the demeaned black folk. Baldwin in his interview with Henry Louis Gate Jr. emphatically articulates

“ I realized that the truth of American history was not and had never been in White House. The truth is what happened to black people, since slavery.”

( Olney 15 )

However, it is not the innate blackness that is portrayed as stereotypically destructive but the phantasmatic misrepresentativeness experienced by Rufus ( in his own eyes ) that leads to his self obliteration. Apart from an ideology, the black body also functions as a sociological entity that takes into itself a reflection of a myopic salvage vision as mirrored by the hegemonic white. This can be assertively exemplified by the love – hate relationship between Rufus and this white mistress Leona. The first love ( lust ) encounter between the two is vividly described as rape where Baldwin mythically paints the image of a black man, one who is violent, aggressive, dominant and overtly sexualized. On the other hand, a white woman yet again is culturally constructed as a possession, both as a statue of victory and product of debasement at the hands of a black man. In other words, Rufus physically humiliates as well as abuses Leona which further engenders a feeling of diabolical hatred in the former. However, this heinousness rather than being mythically projected is embedded in the very experiential mechanics of an individual for instance Rufus’s repugnant criticality is gathered into formation during his days in the military where a black man is harassed and stripped out of humanity at the hands of the white officials. This gory subjectivity is profoundly internalized yet challenged by the same man in the form of terrible asphyxiation of the white body as his submission to its male counterpart succumbed him to reluctant servitude. Thus, at the end Leona ends up in a mental asylum surrounded by the color of her own self that is white, a white asylum with white uniformed doctors and nurses, white walls and window panes which entirely alienates the lonesome black man.

Baldwinian scholar Jessica Young too validates this argument in her thesis in the following words

“ Instead of ignoring race – gender stereotypes, Baldwin allows Rufus and Leona to dominate the beginning. However, by having them die early on, he asserts his critique that this one dimensional portrayal will not dictate his story. Both are doomed because they see each other as the world sees them ”. ( Young 15 )

In addition, the above argument substantiatively authenticates a firm adheres to what Baldwin theorizes as a new form of writing, a textual revolution in the black world. It imputes the genre of protest fiction that further dismantles the idea of universalized blackness and inturn supports the more expansive notion of experience in order to uphold the integrity of human potential. Therefore, while trajectorizing Rufus’s downfall as circumstantial, Baldwin in a way rejects the Wrightian notion of racial category restricted to an identity function. For instance, by maintaining an explicitly narrow conception for protagonists like Bigger Thomas, the author supports the idea of imaginative and cultural renovation for both his characters as well as the American continent.

Furthermore, moving beyond the mythical relationship between Rufus and Leona, a desire that is heterosexual in its utmost sense Baldwin aims at highlighting parallel encounters and bondings which are essentially homosexual ( homosocial to some extent ). One such relationship is that between Rufus and his white unpublished writer friend Vivaldo. Though both never come across an explicit homosexual encounter but the text provides vivid and unconsciously desirous descriptions for the same. Throughout the novel, Vivaldo experiences an extremely strong obsession with blackness. He enjoys taking long walks on the silent streets of Harlem, craves for black women and his unconscious yearning for Rufus acts as a catalyst in igniting a passionate desire for Ida ( Rufus’s sister ).

But before taking into consideration the racially tense relationship between Vivaldo and Ida and the later on the stupefying queer encounter between Vivaldo and Eric ( Rufus’s former male lover ), the one between Rufus and Vivaldo is worth acknowledging as it both racially as well as sexually is capable of highlighting a white disposition of black history and its shortcomings.

The intense relation between the two men is unequivocally demonstrated through Vivaldo’s dream ( after Rufus’s death ) while lying on Eric’s warm bed right in the first chapter of part three of the novel. The dream makes Vivaldo visualize himself running through a rocky country, terribly exhausted climbing a stony bridge where his dear friend Rufus is calling him for a sensual embrace. But for Vivaldo, this is bewilderedly horrifying. He witheringly mutters  
“ Don’t kill me, Rufus, Please. Please. I love you. ” ( Baldwin 297 ).

However, counter to what was expected, Vivaldo is completely vitalized by Rufus's soft touch as if some unconscious desire of the past has reenacted itself thereby replenishing his soul with an eternal bliss and when he wakes up, it is not Rufus but Eric's arms folded over him. In other words, Vivaldo's realization of his past passion for his dead friend is responsible in gravitating his sexual attraction towards Eric. This instance both bears a testimony to Vivaldo's queer personality as well as complicates the idea of interracial love between men. Before this, Vivaldo elucidated to Eric the perplexed feelings flowing between him and Rufus when the latter was completely heartbroken and impinged by misconceived self identity. This was the time when Rufus was in dire need of a true friend and it was none other than Vivaldo who could have aided him out of racial claustrophobia but he didn't and just because of this he is overcome by a feeling of guilt later on. He disturbingly articulates

"I loved Rufus, I loved him, I didn't want him to die...I guess I still wonder what would have happened if I'd held him, if I hadn't been afraid." ( Baldwin 267 ).

Therefore, the above evocative moment is a clear manifestation of psychologically tormenting relation between men cross – racially. But this is not so in the case of Vivaldo and Eric or Eric and his French lover Yves ( both are white pairs ). Baldwinian critic Stafanie Dunning in her essay *Parallel Perversions : Interracial and same Sexuality in ' Another Country '* provides considerable textual evidence for the same. She aims at theorizing her argument with respect to the reiterative concerns of Black Nationalism which includes reproduction and threat of extinction. Thus, according to it, homosexuality is endangering to the nationalistic spirits of blacks as it halts their developmental responsibility towards their own progeny. In short, same sex relations are both anathematic and counterproductive to the idea of nationhood.

However, opposite can be observed in the mono - racial and same sex relation between Eric and Yves. Both try to maintain a blissful homely space devoid of restrictive ambiguity and laborious anguish. Equating the two stances, it can be conveniently concluded that gayness is emblematic of whiteness and such tendency if persists in black or interracial couples, it is bound to be negativized and thwarted. Same can be remarked about the homosexual relation between Vivaldo and Eric where both the white characters are able to gaietyily come together and share affectionate pleasures with gratifying intensity while on the other hand the relation between Eric and Rufus is atrociously doomed thereby necessitating the former character to leave America itself and fly to France.

Moving further, Vivaldo is overcome by guilt for the fact that he could have saved his dear friend from committing suicide but his reluctant attitude towards compromising his innocence adds a pungent odour of superficiality to his character. He practices an idealistically exceptional viewpoint that true love and trustworthy friendship are capable of blurring the demarcatory lines of race thereby establishing a genuine fraternity among people across the boundaries. However, Ida time and again tries to obliterate the above idea of brotherhood thereby corroborating the existence of racial divide between blacks and whites. The following conversation verifies the same.

‘ Listen to yourself. You people ! ’

‘ – didn’t know anything about Rufus - ’

‘ Because we are white. ’

‘ No. Because he was black. ’ ( Baldwin 322 - 23 ).

Thus, according to Ida, nobody ( including Vivaldo ) ever knew his brother, his psychological dilemma during the last days of his life just because he was black. In a way, Vivaldo by camouflaging the white colonial violence in order to replace it with blind innocence subconsciously aims at delimiting his positive whiteness over and above the others of his race. He tries to pose himself off as though white in color but ideologically different, who sympathizes with the notion of black endurance and is capable of deviancy by offering humanness to black people. But Ida is overtly skeptic of this unrealizable artifice and takes on the daring initiative to avenge her suffering. Here she truly becomes the Baldwinian mouthpiece where the author in “ Letter to my Nephew ” ardently declared “ It is the innocence which constitutes the crime ” ( Baldwin 14 ).

And it is this criminalized innocence that Ida rejects by consistently belaboring the presence of black blood of her brother on Vivaldo’s white hands, a persistent reminder of his guilt and by doing so she is able to maintain a sharp focus on the pathetically inexplicable distress as experienced by Rufus thereby furthering her attempt to castigate his white perpetrators. She does so by sleeping with a white man, a flagrant outburst to overpower and belittle the whiteness of the latter. She avows her individuality by retorting “ I didn’t want to be at their mercy. I wanted them to be at mine. ” ( Baldwin 326 ).

In short, unlike Rufus Ida features as the proud black American tarnished by neither the ideological characterization of her race nor the stereotype of black

femininity. Instead, she resists the fate of her brother as well as that of the other Harlem women. Aspiring to be an onstage performing singer, she wishes to unbound herself of the racial shackles that enchain her existence. However, this is not so easy as her life is stained with unceasing mortification not only at the hands of the cold white racists but also from her own black people. In the last pages of the novel, she recalls her experience of the last night when she was out at the bar with Ellis and Cass, where she was verbally maltreated by the black musicians. The bass player maliciously whispered in her ear  
“ You black white man’s whore, don’t you never let me catch you on Seventh Avenue, you hear ? I’ll tear your little pussy up ” ( Baldwin 331 ).

But Vivaldo seems to be unconsciously ignorant of the unfortunate experiential circumstances that Ida was undergoing through ( to which Rufus was initially subjected ). In other words, he is unable to provide what she exactly demands for and that is to be cognizant of the outside realities as well as the existence of societal dichotomies that are capable enough to hegemonize a particular bracket of people. She is critical of his benevolently comprehensive nature that is too idealistic for their contemporary American world. This further compels a particular reader to contemplate the deeper meaning epitomized in the body of the novel especially its title. The author palpably portrays a desolate country of bohemian artists, racially segregated and emotionally agonized that makes one realize the necessity of transport to ‘ another country’, a space which is beyond the narrow confinement of categorical identity politics, where the individuality of a person is both recognized and maintained along with the provision of security and freedom.

As far as the framework of the novel is concerned, the only another country that features in it is France where Eric took shelter after his thwarted relationship with Rufus and on further interpretation, he can be labeled as the most stable character throughout the text. This is mainly because he consciously resists obscuring definitions that have an ability to contain one’s personhood. In short, France provides him with a liberal space devoid of arbitrary limitations, where he can freely indulge in a homosexual relation with Yves, a Frenchman and thus exercise the authority to define himself ( unlike Rufus who always trusted the ideologically white viewpoint of himself ). Eric can thus be considered as Baldwin’s white counterpart as the latter in his critical essay ‘ Here Be Dragons ’ penned down two years before his death, where he talks at length about how he himself transcended beyond the conventional containments thereby self – fashioning the very idea of category itself. He proudly articulates

“ ... All of the American categories of male and female, straight or black were shattered... very early in my life. Not without anguish certainly; but once you have discerned the meaning of a label, it may seem to define you for others, but it does not have the power to define you to yourself” ( Baldwin 4 ) .

Besides this, the novel conveniently concludes with the belaboring idea of another country in its immediate background as it features Yves arrival to America from France. Though primarily insecure, but as soon as Eric confirms his presence around, Yves gains back his confidence as now he will not feel a sense of alienation and lonesomeness in this new country. However, the author abstains from providing any hope for future transformation as the text is left open-ended. The idea of reconciliation figures inconspicuously and what happens next is realistically uncertain. In short, the novel ends on a conservative note though paradoxically dated in Istanbul, December 1961.

Altogether, Baldwin’s initiative to pen down an accomplished textual study in order to courageously highlight the problematics of race and sexuality in America is completed, examined and explored thereby perpetuating the profundity of American history. Its compassionate yet provocative elucidation of love and hatred, assertively discerns an active interrogation of realities and boundations that are capable enough to restrain the inner personalities of the sketched out American misfits. In a way, the population of America is in a dire need of ‘ another country’, a utopic nation where differences are disregarded, identities are not fractured and finally a place where respect for humanity forms an integral basis of sustaining relationships rather than spiteful disgrace of individual selves.

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