

Live and Let Live: The Nucleus of James Baldwin's Writings

Abstract

James Arthur Baldwin (August 2, 1924 – November 30, 1987) was a Black American novelist, writer, play write, poet, essayist and a civil right activist. Through his forceful writings Baldwin surprised the society by introducing it to the new 'black' sensibility and strength. It was he who made the contemporary writers realize the pangs of the "blacks", that they were no more contented merely by serving their higher counter parts-the whites-by polishing their shoes or cleaning their floors or reaping their crops. Although to deal in the same themes of black problem, he evidently differed from his predecessors in suggesting the solution. Theirs was a protest, his was tolerance and co-existence. His first hand childhood experiences in the Harlem Negro ghetto in New York largely contributed to his development as a sensitive- sensible artist.

Keywords: Writing, Writers, Black

Introduction

The emergence of Baldwin in the sixties as a spokesperson of the black race and as a voice of America was the emergence of a new awareness in America. His contribution to the African-American Literature began at a time when Richard Wright's *Native Son* had shown the anger and protest and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* has been visible everywhere. Baldwin's refusal to the protest ideas of Wright gave a new dimension, as it suggested a poised balance between the acceptance of the existence of the black by the white and the black being in a position to be able to talk to the white to agree upon co-existence as a solution for the next generation. Some of his writings show his anger for both, black and white, because he considers that the black is also responsible for his condition as much as the white. He suggests, if one of them plays on the flute of love and tolerance, the other is sure to have to forget the ill feeling and hatred and by doing so both can reach the rendezvous. In his opinion the 'Negro' has been formed by America for better or for worse, and that he does not belong to any other country, and that mutual love and acceptance is the only remedy for this racial prejudice and hatred. He writes: "...if love will not swing wide the gates, no other power will or can."¹

Baldwin is different from the other spokesmen for the black cause, because while others simply criticize the victimization of the black, Baldwin presents a remedy for it too. He merely arouses them to and makes them aware of their deprived rights, tells them the justified reason for this protest, and finally suggests and shows them the possible ways, saying that the common thing in the fellow men has been, 'their ache to come into the world as men'. He further writes: "We are here to proclaim the right of our people to speak, to let our people, black people, make their entrance on the great stage of history."² He is sure that nothing could strip off the 'Negro' of his right to the land purchased with his blood. He further feels that black has been accepted as a beautiful attractive *colour* "not because it is loved but because it is feared."² Baldwin is considered one of the foremost literary spokesmen for the American Negro, and also the most outspoken one. Critics say that Baldwin thinks that Negroes in the U.S. normally learn to despise themselves, and believe no longer in the good faith of other Americans. A critic writes:

He claims the Negro disbelieves what he calls the 'white American myths', such as the supposed love of freedom of early Americans, the 'greatness' of America, the invincibility of Americans in battle and their wisdom in peace, the fairness of Americans to Mexicans and Indians and minority groups, and the virility of American men and purity of American women. Baldwin considers color to be more than a human or a personal reality-he regards it as a political problem re-requiring re-examination by white Americans of all they think they believe in.³



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Might be, that Baldwin had some day got the realization that black, as a colour by nature can protect its identity by mixing and mingling because it takes its origin from the mingling of colours. Baldwin exhibited his wisdom through his slogan of acceptance and co-existence. According to Forster, generally people misunderstand the noble the principle of tolerance to be weak virtue, destroying the manliness of a person, but the truth remains that tolerance requires a lot of self-discipline and restraint which requires the strength of body, mind and soul. It is really wise to think and decide that what cannot be done should not be undone, but done differently to serve the purpose most respectfully, peacefully and humanly. In "Tolerance", Forster writes:

If you don't like people, put up with them as well as you can. Don't try to love them: you can't, you'll only strain yourself. But try to tolerate them. On the basis of tolerance a civilized future e built Certainly, I can see no other foundation for the post-war world.....Tolerance I believe will be imperative after the establishment of people....!have been asking myself how I should behave if, after peace was signed. met Germans who had been fighting against us. Should n't try to love them: I Shouldn't feel inclined. They have broken a window in my little ugly flat for one thing. But I shall try to tolerate them, because it is common sense, because in the post-war world we shall have to live with Germans....We shall have to put up with them, not for any lofty reason, but because it is the next thing that will have to be done.⁴

It can be noticed that Baldwin and Forster are close to each other in artistic sense too. In this connection Brook Allen writes:

....as a writer and as a cultural influence, Baldwin was in fact much closer, at least in his work, to the Englishman E. M. Forster than he was to James, his compatriot and fellow exile. Forster and (3) Baldwin shared an almost religious faith in the sacramental and redemptive nature of love, and specifically of the sexual act. They also shared the propagated a simplistic and nonsensical stereotype of Anglo-Saxon Culture as frozen, anti sensual, emotionally out of touch, and unnatural, and a corresponding sentimental notion of non-Anglos as elemental, natural, and free: Forster's prototype of the sexy Mediterranean corresponds perfectly to Baldwin's prototype of the brilliant and intense Harlem Jazz musician. Both homosexuals, the two writers idealized male characteristics and male friendship and show only a token interest in women and a cursory understanding of them.⁵

Through his novels Baldwin tries to remove the racial prejudices regarding love or sex. He has depicted his black characters having sex or amorous relation with white, white with black, man with man, man and female. But, this is not a literature which presents mere naked and sex scenes, but, imparts a moral that love and sex is to be decided as a personal choice of a person. Love cannot be made happen or originate by force or by efforts, it is a natural most phenomenon like the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings"⁶

Baldwin feels that love is a powerful medium to control and change human life. He wants the betterment of the human society: "I do not mean anything passive. I mean something active, something more than a fire, like the wind, something, which can change you. I mean energy. I mean a passionate being can do, and become, what a human being can do change the world in which he finds himself." ⁸ The basic difference between Wright and Baldwin arises out of the gap between their concept. While Wright always talks about retaliations, Baldwin talks about peace and love and co-existence. In this sense he is apart from other literary spokes men because he is the first writer who has addressed simultaneously the blacks as well as the whites, in context of black- white integration. Baldwin, the artist and the spokes person, are the same -a genius that paved the way for Americans-black and white, bringing 'A new climate, a new season, a new element'.⁶

However, during such a hectic time of black upsurge and revolts, it is quite pleasant to find an optimistic aspect pervading the work of Baldwin. It shows his dauntless and persevering temperament which had made up its-mind to try for the upliftment of the neglected but, in a positive way. In an interview, when asked by Clark, whether he were an optimist or a pessimist, Baldwin replied that he was never a pessimist, but, always an optimist. In the words of Baldwin: "In both glad and sorry you asked me that question, But I'll do my best to answer it. I can't be a pessimist because I'm alive. To be a pessimist means that you have agreed that human life is an academic matter, so I'm forced to be an optimist; I'm forced to believe that we can survive whatever we must survive."⁹ James Baldwin is a graphic portrayer of American Negroid social realities. In most of his fiction, beginning from Go Tell It On The Mountain to Just Above My head, he has looked bard at the ghetto life to which American Negroes were condemned. His protagonists are born in ghettoes and are victims of social deprivation and alienation. They are 'children of a lesser God', just like the HARJJANS in India and 'God's Chillun' in America.

Objective of the Study

1. Give an overview of work by James Baldwin
2. Discuss the impact of work by James Baldwin.
3. Discuss themes of James Baldwin's writings.
4. To bring forth the Baldwin's view about racism, colour and social condition of Black Americans.
5. To present his optimistic view to one and all.
6. His message to create a feeling of co-operation and Live and Let Live.

Conclusion

Yet, he proposes later that the Negro has to lift himself up and away from the trap of history. In The Fire Next Time, he advises the 'Negro youth' not to look back at the injustices heaped on their ancestors, but to look forward for integration in American life. The Negro has to seek and find his identity as an American-that is the only meaningful path of survival for him. This is the conclusion that he arrives at in his Notes of A Native Son, his novel, Just Above My Head. Baldwin's oeuvre is dark and

somber but there is a ray of light at the end of the tunnel. After studying Baldwin's essays and novels one can say that his main concern is on moral values of human life as he conveys the message of 'live and let live'.(5)

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