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ASPECTS OF EXISTENTIALISM IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE - A SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE NOVELS OF JAMES BALDWIN



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ABSTRACT

James Arthur Baldwin, raised out of the racial nightmare of Harlem to carve a permanent niche for himself in American letters, is easily the most gifted and the most disturbing artist of distinction to have appeared in the history of black American literature. "I would place him very high among writers," said Benjamin DeMott, "in part because his work showed a powerful commitment to the right values and had a profound impact for good on our culture" (Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol.50.83). He was a writer of daring and dignity and his soul witnessed a tug-of-war between two uncompromising urges – one yearning for his African

roots and the other lamenting over and rejoicing in its American heritage of insult and injury, of freedom and possibility.

KEYWORDS : *Existentialism , African-American Literature , mentor Richard Wright .*

INTRODUCTION

Self-exile was the way shown by his mentor Richard Wright to flee from the fear and rage of American realities. Baldwin sought a home away from home in Paris. But he could neither wean himself completely from the happening in his native land nor accomplish an enduring truce between his warring urges. He remained a trans-Atlantic commuter for four decades. In this predicament lay the complexity of his fate and the commitments of his life and writings. Baldwin is well known for his unique literary style characterized by poetic profusion and power. He is also remembered as an ardent civil rights crusader, a polished pamphleteer, a racial rhetorician, a witness who committed himself to the sacred task of giving testimony to what he had seen, and a prophet praying to God to be merciful and praying for humanity to transform itself before God metes out His final justice. "Baldwin speaks boldly as a Negro – that is to say, as a human being while recognizing his responsibility to the craft he practices" (Granville Hicks. "Commitment without Compromise" Saturday Review.9).

He employed more than one prose type and several of the communication media, the newspaper, the theatre and the printed book in order to keep his voice heard and to amuse, stun, exhilarate and exasperate the readers. He was an accusing finger thrust in the face of white America.

His function as a writer was irksome and so were his commitments. After all, to write, if taken seriously, is to be subversive and to disturb the peace. The writer does not merely record what happens; he probes.

Although Baldwin had earned a reputation for being a harsh critic, and for exposing the grit and grime in American race relations, he was actually most committed to the problems and possibilities of finding and holding love. He desired not only having the truth but seeing the reason why it was true by dispassionately probing for sources, causes and consequences. Thus, Baldwin's deep concern was with one's past and the past of one's country or race as the starting point for understanding the present and foreseeing possible future developments. Baldwin was, therefore, committed to exploring a wide spectrum of topics such as the responsibility of the writer to promote the evolution of the individual and society; the indivisibility of private life and the public life; the essential need to develop sexual and psychological consciousness and identity; the past historical significance and the current potential explosiveness of color consciousness and the racial crisis; the need for demythologizing the prevailing ethos of American history, religion and culture; and the intertwining of love and power in the universal scheme of existence as well as in society's structures. (F.L. Standley and L.H. Praaatt, viii).

He published six novels, two plays, eight books of essays, a Rap on race with Margaret Mead, a Dialogue with Nikki Giovanni, a book of short stories, a collection of poems, a book for children, a film scenario based on the *The Autobiograph of Malcolm X*, and a number of articles, interviews and book reviews in leading journals. During the 1980's three major projects occupied him : a novel *Petals for Mohammed*, and a play, *The Welcome Table* and a triple biography of the martyrs Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., to which he gave the tentative title *Remember This House*. It is interesting to note that Baldwin intended writing, in the early 1950's, a slave novel, set on the Emancipation Day in 1863, provisionally entitled *Talking at the Gates* in which he meant "to explore his belief that black and white in America were bound by strong ties, including blood ties, and that it was the pathological denial of these bonds, as opposed to actual differences, that fuelled the racial nightmare" (James Campbell, *Talking at the Gates*: New York Viking, 1991.9.135). This indicates Baldwin's life-long commitment to work for racial integration in America.

When analyzed together his writings express his fundamental outlook and interests, there is a thematic homogeneity of his writings, theme of commitment is a consistent, and the most pervasive one in Baldwin's work and it has shaped and dominated his life and art. Baldwin established a reputation as a man of letters and his prolific and provocative writings, so voluminous, so diverse, remain a revelation of his life and his commitments. The great contribution of Mr. Baldwin is that he finds words to express what one knows to be true: how it feels to be an American Negro.

James Baldwin had a singularly unhappy childhood. He was born in the year 1924 in Harlem. Harlem is geographically part of the U.S., but sociologically an island surrounded by the rest of the country. Berdis Emma Jones, his mother, who worked as a domestic servant married David Baldwin in 1927 when Baldwin was just three years old. David Baldwin was a sternly authoritarian religious fanatic who had migrated from Neo Orleans to New York. Young James thus acquired a name, a providing patron but not a benevolent father figure. His illegitimacy obsessed him from the time he first learned about it in his boyhood right to the end of his life. He did not blame his mother in any way for bringing him into the world illegitimate; he was always very tender about her. He was a bastard child. He realized gradually why his father was rarely pleased with him. David Baldwin despised and taunted his stepson for his illegitimacy, his uncouth appearance and later, his independence of spirit.

Baldwin's earliest years were a period of such unrelieved anguish that survival preoccupied him completely, delaying even recognition of the racial problem. His family life was emotionally depleting,

economically deprived socially oppressed like that of a host of Harlem families. The most that could be expected of such family was physical survival. The vicissitudes and vices of the neighborhood in which the survival had to be achieved left an indelible impression on Baldwin's mind, first as evidence of the wages of sin, and later as the indicators of a racial bigotry. From such nightmarish reality, some escape was needed, some sustenance offering spiritual solace and physical safety and emotional release.

Baldwin may be regarded as the first black American writer to alienate himself from the lone enduring black institution, the black church. He is known for his candid and persistent portrayal of its lack of authentic Christian commitment. He came to the conclusion that there was no love in the Church. To him religion was a mask for racial animosity and a shelter for despondency. The church that fails to save the body of a man from starvation can never redeem his soul from damnation. He concluded that he should abandon his connections with the church that was devoid of love and that looked like a house built on the rock of despair. The conception 'that white man's God is white' was inexorable, and the implications were clear. During the period of his early conversion, he wondered why, if white God loved all His children, the black children were rejected. The problem further raises the question about why black people are religious, that is, Christian, in spite of the relatedness of Christianity to their enslavement

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