Racism and Gender in James Baldwin’s Selected Essays

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Abstract
Racism and gender oppression are one of the major issues in Black America. This article attempts to examine these two themes in three essays by the African American writer James Baldwin; namely No Body Knows My Name: A Letter From the South, Faulkner and desegregation and On Catfish Row “Porgy and Bess” in the Movies. It seeks to discuss the experience of the black community under the racist ideologies which were prevalent in twentieth century America. Besides, this study attempts to shed light on Baldwin’s concern about the double oppression of black women in the United States. We shall demonstrate that Baldwin’s source knowledge about his black community have the advantage of portraying what it means to be a man or a woman of color in a community under the mercy of a white majority.

Key words: Baldwin, racism, gender, double oppression, black women.

Introduction: The combined Politics of gender/ race oppression are perhaps the most insidious. Thus, gender oppression seems best overturned within the context of movements to transform various societies. Black women (and men) everywhere can be victimized by the system and the men, their children and others in their lives, precisely because of their race and gender combination (Boyce, 1994:30).

More than that of any other minority in the United States, the history of African Americans has been a long and complex story. During the early decades of the twentieth century the black community encountered various forms of racial discrimination in housing, work, and politics. In addition to racism, blacks suffered from gender imbalance. Racism and gender oppression are similar in that they use stereotypes and ascribed attributes to explain and rationalize the subordination and the domination of particular minorities. The purpose of this article is to explore the theme of racism and gender discrimination in James Baldwin’s selected essays: No Body Knows My Name: A Letter from the
South, Faulkner and desegregation and On Catfish Row “Porgy and Bess” in the Movies. We intend to show that the themes of racism and black women oppression are prominent ones in these essays. James Baldwin is an African American writer whose eloquence and passion on the subject of race in America made him an important figure particularly in the late 1950s and the early 1960s. Baldwin’s essays rely a great deal on his personal experience. It reveals Baldwin’s courageous determination to acknowledge the bitter reality of the American Negro. In his writings, Baldwin aims at showing the miserable social conditions under which African American men and women were the major victims. The author emphasizes the negative image of the Negro as represented in the minds of the American white oppressors and highlights the dual suffering of the black females.

There is a dearth of critiques that analyze the three essays No Body Knows My Name: a Letter from the South, Faulkner and desegregation and On Catfish Row “Porgy and Bess” in the Movies. In fact, scholars have discussed extensively and separately both themes; but they rarely associated racial issue to gender.

Review of the Literature Concerning the literary studies on James Baldwin, we can mention Liza Rosset’s James Baldwin (1990), in which she offers a reading of Baldwin’s Giovanni’s Room as a text that provides a challenge for traditional standards of analysis for African American literature. The author argues that Baldwin posits the white man as a problem and then fantasizes what it means for a particular upper class white man to be aware of the problematic nature of his desires. Emmanuel Nelson in her work James Baldwin’s Vision of Otherness and Community (1983) insists that most of James Baldwin’s main characters are “involved in an ongoing quest for self”. Pekka Kilpelainen in In Search of post categorical Utopia: James Baldwin and the Politics of Race and Sexuality (2010) attempts to show how racism and sexual identity are depicted in Baldwin’s three novels Go Tell it On the Mountain (1953), Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone (1968), and Just Above My Head (1979). He demonstrates that each of these novels is shaped by its socio-political context, providing access to the crucial problems of each era of their production. To finish with Lawrie Balfour’s The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy (2001), the author elaborates the argument that Baldwin saw the moral vision perpetuated by Native Son and much of the tradition of
protest literature as based on the division of the world into “good and evil, innocent and guilty”.

**Historical Context**  The 1950s and 1960s brought about unprecedented and dramatic transformations in American race relations. Most Civil Rights activists who fought to end racial discrimination understood that economic marginalization was a destructive social weapon that brought about suffering to most black families. To quote Derrick Bell, Rather than eliminate racial discrimination, civil Rights laws have only driven it underground, where it flourishes even more effectively... the discrimination That was out in the open during the Jim Crow could at least be seen, condemned, and fought as a moral issue. Today, statistics, complaints, even secretly filmed instances of discrimination that are televised national wide upset few people because evidently, no amount of hard evidence will shake the nation’s conviction that the system is fair for all. (Bell, 1994: 149)

In fact, many of the impoverished were African Americans who in the 1940s and 1950s had migrated from the agricultural south to urban cities in search for economic opportunities. This is best illustrated in the words of the historians John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, The black ghetto that had become a fixture in urban America earlier in the twentieth century gained a measure of permanence during the black migration of the war and post war years while Supreme Court decisions barred both the exclusion of blacks from certain sections or blocks in the city and covenants that restricted residential occupancy to certain preferred groups, usually whites race based housing patterns tended to remain the same. If Negroes attempts to move into neighborhoods where they were not wanted, they often met stern resistance, hostility, and even violence. (Hope and Alfred, 1988:420)Therefore, in the twentieth century a widespread racial discrimination in housing, banking, and policies disadvantaged black people in the United States of America and maintained segregation. The Civil Rights was at peak from 1955- 1965s. Congress passed the Civil Rights Act in 1965 and the Voting Right Act in 1964, guarantying basic civil rights for all Americans, regardless of race after many non violent protests. In passing the Voting Right Act (1964) many Americans hoped that it would mark the beginning of a new era of racial harmony and brotherhood in the United States. However, they were disappointed. The racial ideas of America were deeply rooted and cannot be solved by mere changes in the constitution. (Callaghan, 1990:115)
Biographical Elements  James Baldwin’s life in segregation was a prominent factor in shaping his writings which reflect the racist climate which he and his African American people endured, as it is shown by John Rogers Harris: “As a man of his time, Baldwin represented the incongruence of America’s dirty little secret: The inability to talk honestly about the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality.” (Harris, J, 2003:138) Born in 1924, Baldwin is recognized as one of the leading African American authors. Returning from Europe to the United States after nine years of self exile, Baldwin became the speaking voice for the civil rights of African Americans. Throughout his works, particularly the essays, he focused on a number of controversial themes such as: racism, gender, homosexuality, and the American identity.

Method and Materials  One of Baldwin’s leading themes is racism and the search for self identity. However, in our research we shall argue that theme of racial segregation is better understood when analyzed with reference to gender oppression. Thus, our aim is to show that racial and gender discrimination are important issues which resonate with a profound statement in Baldwin’s works taking as a sample three of his essays; Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter from the South (1958), Faulkner and Desegregation (1956), On Catfish Row “Porgy and Bess” in the Movies (1962). Thus, we find it relevant to approach the subject from a psychological perspective. We shall use Franz Fanon’s Black Skin White Masks. In this work, Fanon explains the black and white relations wherein the white man tries constantly to keep the Negro in an inferior position while the Negro fights back to get rid of his inferiority complex and struggles to be recognized. Furthermore, and to explore more profoundly the suffering and the mistreatment of the black women, we deem it useful to make appeal to Frances Beale’s theory as it is developed in her essay Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female. In 1972, Frances Beale introduced the term “Double Jeopardy” to describe the dual discrimination of racism and sexism that subjugate black women in America.

Discussion

1-The White Man’s Racial Prejudice towards the Negro

Racism is an extreme form of prejudice, because it not only involves the unfair judging of people but it assumes that a person’s own race is superior. Racists believe that segregation and exclusion is morally justified because of their own natural superiority. Consequently, his essays come as a reflection about the attitudes of white peoples’ oppression, racial prejudice and alienation. Baldwin discusses the way the white man strives to
make the black people believe that they are really inferior and that their black skin is a symbol of ugliness and evil. Thus, the black man becomes afraid and ashamed of his race and identity. Franz Fanon has pointed to this when he writes that “The black man among his own in the twentieth century does not know at what moment his inferiority comes into being through the other.” (Fanon, 1952: 83)

In *No Body Knows My Name: A Letter from the South*, Baldwin explores the nature of white and black relations in twentieth century America. In this essay, Baldwin recounts his personal experiences when he visited the south; the city of Georgia and Atlanta. In the city of Georgia the reader is invited to see how many black families suffer at the hands of white oppression. The author remembers a story of an inhuman treatment of a Negro man who was hanged from a tree, while white men cut his sex from him with a knife (Baldwin, 1998:198). Because of this violence against the man of color, Baldwin views color as a feature which conceals the real identity of a man and creates in his mind a kind of hatred towards his race. To explain this psychic turmoil, Baldwin describes it below: He sees himself as he was before he was born, perhaps; or as the man he would have become, had he actually born in his place. He sees the world, from an angle odd indeed, in which his fathers awaited his Arrival, perhaps in the very house in which he narrowly avoided being born. He sees, in effect, his ancestors, who, in everything they do and are, proclaim his inescapable identity. (Baldwin, 1998:197) The above quotation explores the black man’s perception of his own race and how he conceives his home and his ancestors as representatives of his “inescapable identity”, and as archetypes of grievance. So, the Negro considers his ancestors who embody his culture, past and origins to be a curse that follows him everywhere like a shadow. To quote Hussein Abdilahi B, Because of elaborated racial myths and the evident structures of dominance, Whites on the top and blacks at the bottom…what is more, he is personally held responsible not only for his body, but also for his ancestors and his whole race. It is not only a rejection of one’s body and self, but also a verdict of eternal guilt. (Abdilahi, 1985:192)

The overt discrimination of Black peoples in the 1960’s United States was also extant in the field of education. There was a low educational outcome of black children which was due to the white majority’s politics of alienation towards the black minority. The level of Negro education, obviously, is even lower than the general level. The general level is low because the education of the Negroes occurs in, and is designed to
perpetuate, a segregated society. This, in the first place, and no matter how much money the South boasts of spending on Negro schools, is utterly demoralizing. It creates a situation in which the Negro teacher is soon as powerless as his students. (Baldwin, 1998: 201) Thus, the major role of education in America during that era, according to Baldwin, is directed towards keeping black people in their place. The purpose of educating the oppressed is not for integrating them into the world of the white majority but to perpetuate the myth of Negro’s intellectual inferiority. After displaying the disparity between the level of white and Negro educational facilities provided by the American government, Baldwin moves on to describe the difference between the degree and nature of racism exercised in both North and South America. In the North, segregation was unofficial whereas in the Southern part it was considered the law of the land. Speaking about racial segregation in America Franz Fanon observed, In the United States, the Negro battles and is battled. There are laws that, little by little are invalidated under the constitution. There are other laws that forbid certain forms of discrimination and we can be sure that nothing is going to be given free. (Fanon, 1952: 172) Added to this, James Baldwin uses satire to address the white man’s psychological problems when dealing with the black race. He claims that the white man’s repressions are projected on the Negro victim and therefore, the white man tries to emasculate or weaken the Black man, the white man must have seen his guilt written somewhere else, seen it all the time, even if his sin was merely lust, even if his sin lie in nothing but his power: In the eyes of the Black man, sexless, hanging from a tree. (Baldwin, 1998: 204) The incident of the hanged sexless black illustrates the terrible suffering and dehumanization of Negroes by the whites. Baldwin campaigns to convince that the white man’s power and domination nourishes itself from the Negros’ feelings of powerlessness and inferiority each time they come in contact with the white master. In this context, Franz Fanon wrote, “I had rationalized the world, and the world had rejected me on the basis of color prejudice.” (Fanon, 1952:52) The White man strives to keep the Negro in a primitive, stagnant position and without identity. The single identity component by which the Black man and woman have been recognized and dehumanized lies in the color of their skin. In the essay No Body Knows My Name: A letter from the South Baldwin draws on the failure of the American dream by linking it to the Negro cause, I am very often tempted to believe that this illusion is all that is left of the great dream that was to have become America; whether this is so or not, this illusion certainly prevents us from making America
what we say we want it to be. (Baldwin, 1998:198) The great American “illusion” which is expressed in the belief that America is that powerful nation envied by many people across the world, according to Baldwin, does not match the pursuit of happiness of the American Dream, since racial equality is absent and both blacks and whites are in constant struggle either for recognition or for power.

2-Baldwin’s Reaction against Faulkner’s Views on Desegregation

Negroes are savages, brutes, illustrates, but in my own case I knew that these statements were false. There was a myth of the Negro that had to be destroyed at all costs. (Fanon, 1952:88) Baldwin’s essay *Faulkner and Desegregation*, which was published in 1956- the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement- was an onslaught directed towards the southern writer William Faulkner. In an interview cited in the book *Conversations with James Baldwin* (1989) by Standley and Louis H Pratt, Baldwin was asked to clarify his attitude towards William Faulkner’s paradoxical stance towards the southern black-white relations. He answered, Faulkner as a man, as a citizen of Mississippi, is committed to what in Mississippi seems to be their past. It is one thing for Faulkner to deal with the Negro in his imagination, where he can control him; and quite another thing to deal with him in life, where he can’t control him. In life obviously the Negro, the uncontrollable Negro, simply is determined to overthrow everything in which Faulkner imagining himself to believe. (Standley and Pratt, 1989: 7) Hence, Baldwin explores what he considers the white people’s infuriating caution and racial hypocrisy. William Faulkner is trying to overthrow the Negroes’ lived reality as oppressed citizens through offering in his writings some solutions which neither exist nor could be applied in reality. He emphasizes the statement that the white man is hypocrite and reluctant to see any positive amelioration in the life of the Negro, Any real change implies the breaking of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety…For the arguments with which the bulk of relatively articulate white Southerners of good will have meet the necessity of desegregation have no value whatever as arguments, being almost entirely and helplessly dishonest, when not indeed insane. (Baldwin, 1998:209)

James Baldwin goes further accusing Faulkner of being intellectually dishonest because of the fallacious claims of being against the south’s brutal treatment of black people on one side, and because of justifying this segregation on another side.
According to Baldwin, Faulkner is just like many other whites who justify black subjugation under the disguise of some artificial conferences and ornamental speeches that seem to be on the behalf of the Negro: Faulkner goes farther. He concedes the madness and moral wrongness of the south but at the same time he raises it to the level of a mystique which makes it somehow unjust to discuss Southern society in the same terms in which one would discuss any other society. (Ibid: 210)

Baldwin speaks out how African Americans experience pain and anguish of segregation. By contrast, writers like William Faulkner send a powerful message that states that blacks are inferior to whites. This is well illustrated in the following quotation, Now it is easy enough to state flatly that Faulkner’s middle of the road – cannot exist and That he is guilty of great emotional and intellectual dishonesty in pretending that it does. I think this is why he clings to his fantasy. It is easy to accuse him of hypocrisy when he speaks of a man being “indestructible because of his simple will to freedom. (Ibid: 211).

Therefore, Baldwin considers Faulkner’s stance towards the Negro a mere racial propaganda which serves the previous claims of white supremacy and reinforces the Negro inferiority.

3-The Double Oppression of Black Women in America

As blacks they suffer all the burdens of prejudice and mistreatment that fall on anyone with dark skin. As women they bear the additional burdens of having to cope with white and black man. (Beale, 1979: 90) The combination of race and sex discrimination has had a profound effect on the lives and experiences of the black women in America. In his writings, James Baldwin had continually battled the absurdity of racism that made life miserable for him and his Negro community because of their color. In his essay No Body knows My Name: A Letter from the South and On the Catfish Row “Porgy and Bess” in the Movies, Baldwin recounts how the black woman was forced to face the reality of double oppression; of both sex and race. This “double jeopardy” of women of color, as Frances Beale coined it, is addressed openly in the above mentioned essays.

The essay No Body knows My Name: A Letter from the South (1962) starts by a citation of a stanza taken from a song by the African American blues singer Ma Rainey. The stanza is about a black woman wondering in the street searching for her man. We discover how the black woman is a subject for psychological and sexual abuse in South America, particularly in Atlanta before the
civil war. Baldwin says that the white man is a slave of his lust that caused a great pain especially for the woman of color who is forced to be a helpless slave and a machine that produces slave children who will work in the white man’s farms. Perhaps the master who coupled with his slave saw his guilt in his wife’s pale eyes in the morning. And the wife saw his children in the slave quarters, saw the way his concubine, the sensual looking black girl, looked at her- a woman, after all, and scarcely less sensual, but white. (Baldwin, 1998:204) Therefore, the slavery era devalued black women; they encountered numerous instances of extreme pain, humiliation, and sexual attacks. The brutality came from the white male slave holders who did not acknowledge the goodness of the black mammies, who nursed both their white and black children, youth nursed and raised by the black mammy whose arms had then held all that there was of warmth and love and desire, and still confounded by the dreadful taboos set up between himself and her progeny, must have wondered after his first experiment with black flesh. (Ibid: 204) In the field of education, twentieth century American Women in general and black women in particular were under privileged. For Baldwin, educational institutions in America were not designed for the benefit of women, It is unquestionably one of the first tasks of a nation to open all of its schools to all of its citizens. But the dispute has actually nothing to do with education as some among the eminently uneducated know. It has to do with political power and it has to do with sex, and this is a nation which, most unluckily knows nothing about either. (Ibid: 119) In another the essay On the Catfish Row “Porgy and Bess” in the Movies (1959) Baldwin invites the reader to consider how the white man’s prejudice against black people is implemented under the Hollywood cinematographic representations. The essay is a critic of the movie Porgy and Bess for the purpose of displaying the misrepresentation of Negro life in it. Baldwin insists that a film director who is white can never succeed to define the Negro state of being. This is because whites ignore or do not want to show and even to know the real being of the Black race and its history. Baldwin links the role of film’s main character Bess to the difficult life lived of the African American jazz singer Billie Holiday. The essay starts with a description of how the Negro artist in twentieth century America was denigrated and mistreated by the white man, drawing on how the jazz singer Billie Holiday was tortured at the hands of the American government who treated her with disrespect, Yet, at the time I was watching Bess refuse sporting life’s offer of “happy dust”, Billie was in the hospital. A day or so later, I learned that she was under arrest for possession of heroin and
that the police were at her bedside. A number of people, some of whom I knew, were trying to have the dying woman accorded more humane treatment. “She’s setting up today”, said one of the last people to see her alive, “And if they don’t bug her to death, she will never die”. (Ibid: 616)

In the above passage, Baldwin gives a clear picture of how the African American Billie Holiday was dehumanized and doubly burdened. She was recognized neither for her womanhood nor for her talent as an artist because she was female and colored. It becomes much more difficult to live in a society ruled by the white man, In fact, Billie was produced and destroyed by the same society. It had not the faintest intention of producing her and it did not intend to destroy her; but it has managed to do both with the same bland lack of concern. But I did not intend to talk about Billie Holiday who has gained her immortality dearly and who is in no need of any remarks of mine. (Ibid: 616) Therefore, the mistreatment of the black artist Billie Holiday is an indication of the traumatic conditions under which the women of color lived in America. These are tools of societal and psychological oppression that have affected the lives of blacks in general and African American Women in particular. Death for Baldwin means for women like Billie a refuge and the ultimate escape from those who did not let them lead a peaceful life; those whites who did not succeed to define the real identity of the black women simply because “they don’t want to know” about the socio-cultural milieu that produced the women of color, Now Billie Holiday has escaped forever from managers, landlords, locked hotels, fear, illness, and the watchdogs of morality and the law. “I have a long, long way to go”, she used to sing. Well, she made it, all the way from Catfish Row, and no one has managed to define her yet. (Ibid: 620)

At the end of the essay On the Catfish Row “Porgy and Bess” in the Movies, Baldwin defends the image of the black women and condemns the white men’s fallacious views concerning the black woman’s image in America. Baldwin praises the Blues singer Bessie Smith for her pride on her black identity, and he declares openly that this discriminated black artist is in fact more free than those who burdened and oppressed her, People, who thought of Bessie Smith as a coarse black woman, and who let her die, were far less free than Bessie Smith, who had escaped all their definitions by becoming herself. This is still the only way to become a man or a woman, or an artist. (Ibid: 620) Thus, even though Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday suffered from a double dose of discrimination, one based on gender and the other on race, Baldwin insists that these two black women had succeeded
to find their identity and survive in the hard atmosphere of racial society. Black women have had to endure all the violence and racist behaviors. Being aware of this fact, Baldwin explored how the white Americans produced false images about the Negro woman and strived to perpetuate those stereotypes in order to destroy the Negro sense of integrity.

Conclusion

This paper has dealt with issues of racism and gender in Baldwin’s selected essays *Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter from the South* (1958), *Faulkner and Desegregation* (1956), *On Catfish Row “Porgy and Bess” in the Movies* (1962). These essays form a dramatic indication of the oppressive attitudes of white people towards the black community in general and towards the woman of color in particular. In fact, racial segregation has shaped and influenced black experience in America. Even after the Civil Rights laws enactment, new forms of racism came into existence, Paradoxically, as those activists fought for political integration in America, they found in effect, a kind of discursive segregation, or at least enacted a reification of an historic racial binary. The fight for racial justice sparked a new national discourse on race and forced the repetitious articulation of racial appellations, White and Black. (Butler, 2003:52)

James Baldwin succeeded in conveying how racism and gender affect the mentality and the life of black race reducing them to a level of inferiority. Unlike in the twentieth century, Blacks in today America have been assigned a respectable position and they work side by side with white people. The black situation is improving, especially when we see that America- the land where the Negro race had once been subjugated- is taking for a second time Barak Obama as president. Thus, the prophecy of Frederick Douglas several decades ago in his narrative holds true today: “You have seen a man become a slave; you will see a slave become a man”. This does not mean that blacks today are equal to whites since the discourse of white supremacy is still strong and prevalent, especially in the American film industry where blacks are stereotyped most of the time. Therefore, the American culture does not fulfill the melting pot’s aspirations of freedom and happiness, since many other minorities like the Muslims, the Mormons, Hispanics and the Jews who all are still suffering from racial discrimination. Racism and gender are powerful phenomena that mere changes in laws cannot hardly shake or uproot.
Bibliography


