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IN THE PROBED HEART OF RACIAL LINES THROUGH CONTEMPORARY LENS WITH
THE PERIPHERIES OF JAMES BALDWIN'S FICTIONAL TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

The paper leads an exploration into the murky waters of Baldwin's texts in relation to the nuances of racism that are implicit in the contemporary lens; along with its explicit roots that has built history over time. Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter are catchphrases that have built opposing forces in a melting nation of colours and races. The acronymic phrases lead to brevity of information as the times move forward with shortness of how people consume material in terms of social media. With reference to the political atmosphere especially with the elections and consequent win of Trump as the president, the dynamics of such peripheries and limitations are engaged whilst looking at the literary texts. Media discussions influence the wave of views held by the public which inadvertently play into the conversation of racism in the 2010s. The variances in all these mini narratives, hold on to the body of racism in implicit and explicit ways that are still breathlessly a weighed and bogged down reality of the times that is being discussed. Magnanimous, yet, individual repercussions and perspectives are contributed to the growing narrative of racism. The various nuances are pointed out, registered and explored to give rise to seeds of multi-perspectives in the varietal tendrils of how society moves forward.

Keywords: Fiction, Racism, Systemic Racism, Black Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter, Political discussions.

Introduction

In the context of Leemings on his biographical piques about James Baldwin, it was daunting to uncover the meticulous trickles of how complex the writer was. In *James Baldwin: A Biography*, he verbalized Baldwin as "highly complex... driven individual who was more intensely serious..." (Loc 93) Colour draws lines which has been documented in patterns and waves of racism. Grasping the passel that this conflict brings; essentially the conflict lives in plurality: conflicts. Thus, perusing through Baldwin's fictional pieces, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, and his short story "Going to Meet the Man", the two are complementary in the endeavour towards comprehending in-between the lines and colours of racism in the context of the African-American community. Looking at the 2010s, racism peaked with outbursts of visible intolerance during and post the US elections of 2016. However, the issue that we look into in regards to the writings begin before elections of 2016 and this

perspective is seen from the legal and judicial perspective taking the contention between African-American race and the police force as a binary to be explored; which is one of many. Furthermore, the complexity of the issue cannot be understood just by looking at the contention in regards to the binary that is – African-American race and the police force alone, and thus it is crucial that we also look at the political scenario as well.

Materials and Methods Used

The materials that are being zoned in on primarily is in regards to the short story “Going to Meet the Man” and the novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* by James Baldwin. The secondary materials being used are from a plethora of articles and visuals sourced from printed books and the internet. The method applied is derived from new criticism since the contextual times of the era in which the primary texts are taken from, are not analyzed historically, but rather contemporarily in the context of the 2010s. The juxtaposition of ideology and activism which is enlightening to the 2010s (with texts from the 1960s) highlight the use of new criticism as a tool with close reading intact.

Discussion

Major news networking sites like “Al Jazeera English” have covered the US 2016 elections extensively and delved into the kind of racism that we have today. In an episode of “Upfront” with Mehdi Hassan, the news outlet covered the topic of “Who is the real Donald Trump?” The session explains a great deal not only about the then presidential candidate but also about the voters who voted for him. In the panel, the speakers ranged from journalists to writers like – Gwenda Blair who wrote *The Trumps: Three Generations that Built an Empire*, David Cay Johnston who is a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and author of *The Making of Donald Trump*, McKay Coppins who is the author of *The Wilderness: Deep Inside the Republican Party’s Combative, Contentious, and Chaotic Quest to Take Back the White House*, J.D. Vance who is the author of *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, and member of the Republican Party, and Andra Gillespie who is associate professor of politics at Emory University and specialist on race relations and civil rights. The talks highlighted a great deal of what constitute Trump and his voters, which essentially sheds light on the kind of racism we are discussing as well.

When we look at the identity of Trump from the perspective of racism, the importance lies in how he is viewed and how he has perpetuated racism in the US. Painted as an “insecure man” who “really cares about his status in the world” by Coppins, the personality of Trump is further extended when Johnston adds on that Trump is a “world class narcissist” in the aforementioned interview. In relations to his personality, it is seen that the affluence he was born in affects the kind of person that he is, and the reality is that if he was not vying for the title of the president, this would be perfectly harmless. However, the real question as Mehdi Hassan puts, in the interview, is:

And then there are his supporters: Trump’s army of loyal fans who helped him to where he is today; why in the face of so many evidence to the contrary that the Donald is qualified to be commander-in-chief, that it’ll make America great again? Are Trump supporters driven by economic insecurity or just plain old fashioned racism?

The intrigue also lies in the fact that after so many fights for rights and liberties, racism is still a topic for discussion even in this day and century. Support in numbers empowers any issue, and in the context of the racism that we are dealing with, we see that number in power affected the elections of an executive position – a president. The reason why it is important that we look into the voters is because of the fact that the citizens of any country hold great weightage in the type of democratic system that it follows. Moreover, when we also look into the contention between the African-American population and the police force, we see that this is not an isolated event since the whole society perpetuates what happens in any field be it legal, political or otherwise. It is also important to note that, in the context of the US, multiculturalism is a reality and although we are looking at the African American race as a victim of racism, we also have other races like the Hispanic-Americans, the Asian-Americans and so on. However, for the purposes of our study, we look into the African American race as a model of how the vicious perpetuation of racism hurts a community/racial population.

In the context of the voter's identity in the interview, Mehdi in the "Upfront" session asks J.D. Vance about what constitutes the "archetypal Trump voter". Mehdi further pushes the media's portrayal of the voter as – "middle aged white man without a college degree, may have been left behind by globalization." To answer and tackle this portrayal, Vance comments on how it is too complex an issue to be merely specified and reduced to stereotypes from a few variables. The crux of what Vance says in regards to the context of how we are viewing racism lies in the fact that he agrees with what Mehdi says, but furthermore, the fact that these voters are essentially people who are "extremely pessimistic about their future, their children's future and that cynicism has really taken its toll culturally on a lot of the areas where these folks live" is a reality as well. Vance goes on to talk of mortality and divorce rates which are viewed negatively because of the direction in which these voters' communities' cultures are heading. This is further highlighted and extended by Johnston who says that the voters are often people who are "living in a state where they are fearful about their future" especially in economic terms. In such a scenario, Trump feeds on this irrationality and in the words of Johnston, essentially what Trump did was point the fear towards other races in the US –

Trump comes along and says, "I have the answer for you. It's the Mexicans, it's the blacks," that's his (Trump) phrase. "It's the Chinese, it's the idiots in Washington." And like all demagogues, he's now sold this as a simple idea. And Donald's a master salesman, he's a household name, he's a con artist, but he's tapped into this anxiety and fear by people who don't understand public policies.

Therefore, this gives an essential idea about who the voters are. Trump is more like a salesman who has taken advantage of the situation rather than being an orator who moves people to believe in his policies, since he has none. This means that the true power of where society or even the government heads to lies in the power of the voters. These voters in the context of our studies are people who affect the future of nations. The racism is perpetuated by the number of people who share this irrationality in their fears. The fears can essentially be looked at in form of cultural perspective and economic perspective. Perhaps in the context of our study, the cultural perspective sheds better light on the existing scenario of racism in the form of the binary – African American Race and the police force. However, it is also essential to remember that even the economic perspective also perpetuates the racism.

When it comes to the works by Baldwin, the lives of the African Americans are given a priority in the novel especially in describing their day to day activities. The short story on the other hand gives us a perspective of how Baldwin perceives the white man, Jesse the police officer. In these two narratives, we see the dynamics and movements about the position in place for the African Americans when it comes to the legal jurisdiction. The intrigue of the matter also lies in the fact that these narratives are not rare sights in today's scenario where we see slogans and activist movements such as the "Black Lives Matter" which now has a website and a calendar of activities. In protest to these, we also see the slogan "Blue Lives Matter" which is the opposition in question to the former one; although its validation can be questioned. Piling on these, we also have activist groups like Neo Nazis usually in the form of Trump supporters who has held protests like the one we saw in Charlottesville on August 12, 2017. There is a great deal of contention in these issues which can be viewed through the periphery of Baldwin's writings as well.

When we look into the fictional work, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, we see a great deal of the antagonism between the characters especially Fonny and the policeman, Mr. Bell. The difference between the culture then and now is that racism then was much more outright and straightforward than the racism of today, although the racism in today's context is also becoming more explicit in nature. The fictional work has a sense of bitter foreboding in the narration of the entire story. The context of the times is in the fifties and sixties where racism was at its peak and people were vocal about it. When the character of Fonny is analyzed, his position is in a place of disadvantage since he becomes the target of a police officer with a hurt ego. Fonny is well aware of this and he remarks to Tish:

"That cop," Fonny says, "That cop." "What about that cop?" But I am suddenly; and I don't know why, as still and as dry as a stone: with fear. "He's going to try to get me," Fonny says. (73)

However, the degree to which he is punished for the act of hurting a white man's ego is extreme and brutal. Fonny gets accused of rape. The circumstances show a great deal of racism even in the way in which he is caught since he is the only black profile made to stand as the victim stood to identify her perpetrator whom she profiled only as a black man. This contention over the identity of all black being pigeon-holed into one stereotype is not uncommon and even Tish's sister makes an observant remark to her:

Because Fonny was presented to her as the rapist and it was much easier to say yes than to try and relive the whole damn thing again. This way, it's over, for her. Except for the trial. But, then, it's really over. For her. (61)

On top of being a victim of sexual abuse, she was in no position to distinguish the black man from another black man. Moreover, in regards to the case placed against Fonny, the officer Bell clearly had an agenda against him since it was not even his turn to make the dutiful parole rounds of that locality at the time when it happened; Fonny did not even belong to the area and the biggest alibi for him was that he was with Tish and his friend which did not hold in court. The culminating line of all these is that Fonny had every right to fight a fair and legal battle but this does not reflect in the events that occur with his trials. In this, Baldwin paints a heavy picture of systemic racism in which Fonny is already guilty even before he is caught or even before he even has a choice to decide whether he has committed the act or not. The disadvantageous nature in which these events occur shed a great deal of light for the reality of an individual who is discriminated for his racial profile. Juxtaposing this to the context of today, the slogan turned activist movement #BlackLivesMatter, we see that the event which happened on February 23, 2012 that led to this activism as mentioned in their bio of the website showed a great deal of slack in its legal proceedings. When Trayvon Martin was murdered by "the neighborhood watch volunteer" (as recorded in *The New York Times*) George Zimmerman, the circumstances of his death was intriguing in the sense that Martin was just a young seventeen year old teenager who had skittles in his pocket, making his way home during which he got engaged in a fight with Zimmerman and ending up dead by a bullet. Several news outlets like *The New York Times* have covered this trial in which Zimmerman is acquitted. Although the judicial proceedings have more legal conditions and parts, the case is that a young boy was shot in self defence by a gun which the apparent victim was carrying. In revolt of not only this triggering incident but many more like these where young African American boys were shot on suspect, activism like the Black Lives Matter have cropped up which deal with a serious issue of systemic racism profiled against the Other in the society which in this case is the African-American population. Therefore, in some sense, Baldwin touches on this issue where the African Americans often have to accept that the system is already against them. In the novel, Fonny begins to accept his reality in the novel:

Now, Fonny knows why he is here – why he is where he is; now, he dares to look around him. He is not here for anything he has done. He has always known that, but now he knows it with a difference. (96)

However, in the context of our times, we deal with multiple narratives including the one called Black Lives Matter where people are actively fighting against this racism.

In reaction to the activism embodied by Black Lives Matter, the counteract has been the slogan Blue Lives Matter which entails protection of the police officers whose safety is in question because of activism like Black Lives Matter. The movement began after the killings of two NYPD police officers, Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu in Brooklyn New York on December 20, 2014. The antagonistic push and pull has many dimensions and dynamics at play to reduce it to mere statements. Now when we look into Baldwin's short story, "Going to Meet the Man," we see that Baldwin writes from the perspective of the white man, specifically a white police officer, Jesse. The character of Jesse feels like the continuation of Bell from *If Beale Street Could Talk*, in the sense that their negativity permeates the air and the way in which they indulge in their unethical means or lack of principles when it comes to their jobs. However, a crucial point to remember is that Baldwin speaks from the other side of the binary (blacks and whites) while assuming the position of a white man. Therefore, in some ways, this subjectivity could hamper the portrayal.

When we look at the character of Jesse, his views on the blacks are dark and sinister where he expected them to do the worst. The irony here is that he is capable of going beyond what is worst and his thoughts echo this sinister nature of his mindset intermingled with his sadistic sexual hunger, as mentioned in the short story:

There was no telling what might happen once your ass was in the air. And they were low enough to kill a man then, too, everyone of them, or the girl herself might do it, right while she was making you believe you made her feel so good. The niggers. What had the good Lord Almighty had in mind when he made the niggers? (1750)

The thoughts show only the deep dark putrid darkness that seems to be embodied in the character. The question of speaking from a biased point of view shadows in; yet Baldwin has never held back even while presenting other characters in such sinister terms even if they are black like the character of Gabriel from *Go Tell it on a Mountain*. Perhaps the intrigue here would be to focus on why African Americans would always feel this kind of antagonism towards the institution that was made to protect everyone who seeks for help. The story written in the sixties echo a sense of anger and resentment that African Americans of today feel towards the working police force or legal jurisdictions for that matter. The question would ask why the issue prolongs itself over such a long period of time. Although simple answers cannot be given out, it is fair to explore the tenets of these two binaries while comprehending the situation as a whole.

When it comes to today's context, social media perpetuates all kinds of narratives and one among them is the campaign of Blue Lives Matter which has gained its own momentum regardless of the criticisms it faces. When media portrays the death of the two officers who were killed, they make sure to mention the religious practices followed by the deceased like how Ramos was active in a church. Perhaps to make the narrative of their deaths synonymous with something fair and good, the narrative seems to follow a quest of justification. In Baldwin's short story, Jesse seems to think in terms of how he is a good citizen despite how disturbing his thoughts are to the readers – "And he was a good man, a God-fearing man, he had tried to do his duty all his life, and he had been a deputy sheriff for several years." (1750) The question of goodness is irrelevant, when the killings did happen because the said officers were not indicted in the deaths of the blacks who were the victims. The prejudice in question needs to be addressed when the murderer of the two victims, Ismaiyyl Abdullah Brinsley is painted in an almost sinister kind of way when his criminal records follow his description in news outlets. Even more so, this antagonism could be working both ways where one side paints a sinister narrative of the other and vice versa.

Nonetheless, in the evolution of these events, we can see that the blue gets privilege over the black when the hate crime act was passed in Louisiana on May 2016 followed by many other states where targeting police officers and firefighters is a hate crime with repercussions. The move behind this is often called a Trump move where he chooses blue over black in contrary to what Obama did. Nonetheless, the essential crux here is the danger that this puts forward which has been meticulously recorded in an article by Dara Lind in *Vox* where it is stated:

It's long been accepted — in practice, if not in policy — that the No. 1 job of law enforcement officers is to keep themselves safe, and that they ought to be allowed to do whatever it takes to ensure that. From that perspective, any attempts to restrict the power of police officers — whether from management or from the public — are rules imposed from the outside that could render officers unable to defend themselves. They are, or could be, threats to officers' lives.

Combine this with a couple of high-profile ambush-style attacks on police — the murders of officers Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos in New York in December 2014, and the attack that killed six Dallas police officers in June 2016 — and you have the germ of a powerful idea: that criticism of police officers puts their lives in danger.

In some sense, the police force is given a free pass in this loop, which cannot be the same for the African-Americans. The danger in this is imminent and recognizable where a whole institution can be exempted from criticism.

Conclusion

The dynamics in power explained previously show a great deal of racism and prejudice which are echoed even in the works of James Baldwin's writings. The argument is extensive and goes beyond just activism like Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter but holding these two binaries, we see many dimensions at play within these two forces which demand questions and insights to how they are operating. From an observational point of view, the racism is not a reductive topic but rather engages in a myriad of issues which constitute it. Again, it should be emphasized that the African Americans in the US are one part of the whole racial population which is made up of other races who face racism as well. Moreover, in this study we have only undertaken one aspect of the racial prejudice – African Americans and the legal jurisdiction binary. In reality, we have more dimensions to be explored like the Neo Nazis and the Antifa. We also have the economic aspect where white supremacists believe that jobs are being taken by immigrants from US citizens. However, to avoid too many complexities, the above dimensions have been explored in relation to the writings by Baldwin. The remnant of this discussion remembers that nuances exist; these observations point towards the prejudice and hatred that is involved. The African-American community stands enraged at the crimes asking for better protection from the institutions which should fight for their rights as well; judicially and legally. The outcry of these nuances as seen in Baldwin's writings are still a recurrent reality in the 2010s and following timeline/s.

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