

**James Baldwin's picturization of female characters as nothing but  
living embodiments of Sacrificial motherhood: An Appraisal**

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**Abstract**

This paper analyses the literary qualities of James Baldwin as not only an artist but also active reformer fighting for rights of Blacks especially women who have undergone unspeakable sufferings and untold miseries in their lives as well as in all their pursuits. His writings are almost embodiment of fighting spirit for human values and freedom

Keywords: Artist, active reformer, struggle, suffering , fighting  
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It is generally held that James Baldwin being not only an artist but also an active stands foremost among the Black writers in his portrayal of men and matters especially female characters. Baldwin's bitter struggle during his boyhood, suffering the pain of being black and poor in America, and at the same time supporting younger brothers and sisters in Harlem, living under the strains of a dubious religious system that was obscurantist, and himself undergoing a religious conversion only to walk out of it at his own discovery of the fact that God was 'white' and was no supporter of Blacks – his involvement in the Civil Rights Activities, have yielded brilliant fruit in the passion and humanity of his work. He was shaped by the age in which he lived, the turbulent middle years of the twentieth century. Harlem, at the time he was born, was known to the whites in America as a place fit only for Jazz entertainers and its numerous night clubs. It was the only path blacks could pursue to success at that time. But

with Baldwin's publication of *Notes of a Native Son* and *Go Tell it on the Mountain* the whole scenario changed. It made the Blacks to be seen as a more serious entity than being just entertainers. This great turnaround was achieved by the exemplary performance of countless successful young blacks like Baldwin who appeared as black intellectual symbols. Baldwin by his brilliant writing shook the conscience of white Americans. He reached audiences that had never been reached before by a black artist.

James Baldwin was born on 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1924 in Harlem, New York which is geographically part of the United States but sociologically only an island surrounded by the rest of the country for it is predominantly a Black neighbourhood, a Black ghetto, subjected to all inhuman white racism, suppression, humiliation and oppression. Baldwin was born a Black and to a large extent, this accidental birth dictated his course of life and writing. A study of the life of Baldwin, his family and ethnic background, the environment in which he lived, struggled and the sacrifices he made to come up in life fighting simultaneously against all the injustices perpetrated by the racial society world help one in understanding the author and his writings. His childhood was miserable Harlem was one of the worst slums in the western world, where the scars of poverty, drug, alcohol addiction, violence and racism showed on almost every face in the street. At home there was more misery and confusion. He felt he had scarcely ever had enough to eat. Psychologically as well, he was more upset because he believed himself to be ugly and equally hurtful, he thought his mother too to be ugly. He also relied on his mother for she stood as a rock between her children and her husband's wrath for which all her children especially James were very grateful to her. Baldwin described his mother as "a very tough little woman", both gentle and strang. "You have lots of brothers and sisters", she used to say, "you don't know what's going to happen to them. So you've to treat everybody like your brothers and sisters; Love them" (Essence 80).

Being an avid reader, Baldwin read a mixture of the prescribed and the prescribed; the former was the Bible and the latter just about everything

else. He is said to have completed reading Dickens, Dostoevsky and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* before he reached his teens. Being a talented boy and good in his studies, Baldwin was a good writer too. Trudier Harris rightly comments:

“Of the three major black male writers who are usually pointed out in America – Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. Baldwin has made a much more consistent attempt to portray black women than either of the other two”. He adds “when we think of Richard Wright, the portrait of black womanhood that immediately comes to our mind is that of Bessie Mears, the drunk, victimized, desperate young woman in *Native Son* and who is killed by Big Boy Thomas and whose body serves as a piece of evidence in the case concerning Mary Dalton. When we think of *The Invisible Man*, we think of his sexual inactivity as a preclusion to serious portraits of black womanhood and we turn instead to Mary Rambo, the mothering saint who nurses him back to health after his fiasco in the paint factory. Baldwin has given more serious attention, over a long period of time and through many more works, to portraits of black women” (Harris 206).

Baldwin loved his mother very much, probably this togetherness in ugliness bound Jimmy in love with his mother. He was very much devoted to her, he grew up helping her as she brought each of her children into the world,

feeding and changing them, using one hand to support a baby and the other to hold a book. He always stood by her side helping her in her house-hold chores and running errands for her. That is why Baldwin developed special concern for women.

Baldwin graduated from De Witt Clinton High School in 1942. Having served on the staff of the school Literary Magazine 'Magpie', he was determined to become a writer. He completed his very first novel *Go Tell it on the Mountain* in 1953 and the first play *The Amen Corner* in 1954 in exile. The strong influences on Baldwin's writings were his own family, the Harlem ghetto, its squalid surroundings. The experience of his religious conversion and his own family, his whimsical father, his loving mother and all those brothers and sisters thread their and all those brothers and sisters thread their way in Baldwin's first novel *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. *Giovanni's Room* appeared as the second novel in 1956. The third novel *Another Country* appeared in 1962, revolving around both white and black characters, all of them artists struggling to come up *Toll Me How Long the Train's been Gone* (1968) tells of brotherly love of two young Blacks and the struggle, one as an artist puts up to stay in theatre as an actor, Baldwin's childhood influences are seen in the novel. His involvement in the Civil Rights Movement gets reflected in the novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), thereby presenting a whole family of Blacks going all out to fight the injustice rendered to a black youth. In this novel, Baldwin emphasizes the need for the Blacks to come together in oneness to fight white oppression. The last novel *Just Above My Head* (1979) does resemble the author's long short story "Sony's Blues". Here in this novel, various favourite themes of Baldwin like love, hope, death, civil rights movements, oppressive and terrifying deep south find expression. However much Baldwin gave vent to his anti-white repression and anti-God sentiments in his novels and essays, Baldwin was hopeful that America would one day reconcile to the color problem and racism would cease to exist. In May of 1976, receiving an honorary Doctor of Letters Degree at Morehouse College, Atlanta, Georgia, Baldwin expressed his

belief that, in fact, change had taken place in his life time and that the future held hope:

“When I was born, blacks generally were  
born trapped into a White man’s fantasy,  
Black children are not trapped into a  
White man’s fantasy now... I feel a  
great wheel turning. This has never  
been a white country and the truth is  
coming out. Blacks have always been  
a part of this country but the country  
was never able to accept that. But  
we are flesh of the flesh, bone of the  
bone. And we will triumph” (Pratt 28).

James Baldwin’s life and work was a significant contribution to the part of that ultimate triumph. His achievement lay in his portrayal of real-life characters. He did excel in the portrayal of women characters. His love for his mother, his observation of the sacrifices Black women make for the sake of the family have had an indelible impression on James Baldwin and he has paid rich tributes to these sacrificing women in his novels. Quite interestingly, when it comes to the portrayal of man-woman relationship also, Baldwin’s women always show greater personal and wordily insight. More than this, the woman is often more aggressive, more intelligent and more successful – she is stronger’ than her man. So, in *Another Country*, Cass Silenski outsteps Richard in intellectual and perceptive quality and the black Ida Scott dominates the white Italian Vivaldo Moore with her long-learned knack of managing the world. That Baldwin’s works are notable for their strong, sensitively explored female characters is best proved in his novel namely *If Beale street could Talk*. This novel attempts a first person narrative by a nineteen – year old uneducated, unmarried black female, Clementine Rivers, known as Tish. Tish is pregnant, her lover Alonzo Hunt known as Fonny is in jail, falsely implicated in a rape case by a black-hating racist white cop. Tish though young and uneducated works hard and

stands like a rock to get Fonny out of jail. Fonny's mother and sisters show no love and interest to get Fonny out of jail – they curse Tish for getting him into trouble. But Tish runs from pillar to post, pays the White lawyer – works overtime to raise the money for costs, meets Fonny periodically in jail, consoles and comforts him, encourages him and assures him that he will be out of jail soon. Sharon Rivers, Tish's mother emerges as another strong woman with great skill in the novel.

Sharon Rivers understands her daughter's pre-marital pregnancy, her love for Fonny and the efforts she puts up to get him out of jail. She sets out bravely alone to Puerto Rico to meet Mrs. Rogers, the Puer to Rican woman who was supposed to have been raped by Fonny. There is Puerto Rico She pleads with her to save Fonny. Sharon Rivers is presented not only as an ideal woman willing to act in times of crisis but also as an idealized mother who will go to all extends to free her daughter and daughter's lover from trouble. Another great example of an active woman ready to spring to action in times of need is Ernestine Rivers, Tish's sister. She acts as a nurturer and a protector for Tish. It is she who looks after Tish with great care, works hard to raise more money for the case and ceaselessly works for the happiness of her sister, not only because she is her sister but also because she is just another black woman born to suffer. Ernestine is an activist, an untiring worker. She is street-wise and also politically conscious. Her mind and heart reflect the commitment that guides her life. In her active approach towards life, she is outside the church and influence of God. She takes matters into her own hands as often as she can. In a word, Ernestine definitely emerges as a very strong woman in the novel.

What is admirable in the fictional world of Baldwin is that he depicts his woman characters so magnificently to be real and live-wire. Many of them play strong and active roles, some of them are made to be passive within the family under dominating males, yet all of them play a number of memorable roles. Almost all of the roles in which we find black woman in Baldwin's fiction ore traditional ones – mothers, sisters, lovers,

wives – and almost all of them play roles of support – for the male characters. Baldwin's depiction of the woman and the mother characters shows a definite development in their attitude towards life. From being passive women/mother in the early novels, they grow up to become active mothers and women in the later novels, especially in the last, of his novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*. All the women in the Rivers family in this novel are excellent embodiments of modern, brave, intelligent black womanhood. They are brave, intelligent, outstanding in their behaviour and above – all ready to act. In this novel as Trudier Harris says,

“The novel moves its focus away from  
characters who are inside the  
church, or who have grown up in it,  
to characters who have consistently  
rejected its influence in their lives”

(Harris 130).

No doubt, Baldwin's last novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* is a great tribute to womanhood or motherhood. Baldwin's shows his skill in picturizing women as passive mothers, unwed mothers and active and daring liberated mothers. It is a great tribute to Baldwin's mastery and skill that through his novels, he has glorified the suffering black women in general and the black mother in particular. The mothers in Baldwin's novels stand out in great honour and grandeur in that they spare no effort in saving their children and their families even as all the forces on the earth are opposed to them. Of all the women who play a subservient role to their man and who come into a traditional, sometimes stereotypical conception of the black women tied to her family – Elizabeth in *Go Tell it on the Mountain* stands foremost. The final prayer of the saints belongs to her. “Lord, I wish I had of died! In Egypt land!” is the appropriate epigraph for her story which is of love and tragedy. In fact, her story is more of tragedy Elizabeth's prayer is her life. In the commingling of singing and weeping voices in the church, she instantly recognizes the song Elisha plays. The song is familiar to her, it is

the familiar hymn “must Jesus Bear the cross Alone?” “Elizabeth recognizes it when she hears:

“The consecrated cross I’ll bear,  
Till death shall set me free,  
And than go home, a crown to wear,  
For there’s a crown for me” (GTM 173)

The cross that Elizabeth bears is the suffering that she has had to bear all her life since she was a child. Her life was always filled with misery. Being a black woman, it was an accepted fact that she was unwanted by the white society which made up the American country. Elizabeth’s life had been marked by suffering, the cross that she would bear is significant not of redemption but of suffering as Horace A.Porter comments:

“The cross in Baldwin’s fiction does not stand  
as an unambiguous symbol of Christian  
redemption.... It is, in Baldwin’s imaginative  
world, a dubious iconographic symbol,  
threatening to destroy the very life it  
ostensibly nurtures and protects. It becomes  
the symbol of compromise or perpetual  
adjustment to what may be a rather  
stunning series of personal disasters”

(Porter 102)

The cross that Elizabeth bears through her life is that connected to her love for Richard, her association with him and the child John, she bears him. She bears this cross as a dutiful mother with love, affection and care at the same time under severe repression.

Florence in the novel is a woman of much drive, energy and hope to the future. At the age of twenty six, she discovers she has no future in her mother’s house in the South, she decides to go North to seek her future with courage and determination. She flees to the North leaving her mother in death. Florence’s decision and action is one of the major points of Jacqueline E.Orsegh’s argument that Baldwin’s female characters are



unlike most of those in American and English Literature in that they transcend stereotypes, to become believable characters who believe in action. She comments:

“Baldwin’s women most obviously differ  
from other fictitious females in that  
they act. They do not passive wait for  
Prince charming and life to embrace them;  
they act and are not condemned for  
doing so. Society offers no protection  
to Baldwin’s women; they are realistically  
thrust into a world hostile to their very  
existence and the key is survival”

(Orsagh 57)

Sadly this trait of independent and determined action proves to be unsuccessful in the case of Florence. Truly she escapes to the North determined to make her life but her marriage to Frank makes all her attempts a failure; for Frank is a wastrel. After ten years, he leaves her. Her life with him provides the most damaging evidence that she has not escaped the traditional role cut out for poor black women. She has to be a mute witness to all the aberrations in his behaviour. However much, she struggles to correct him she only failures. Her role becomes one of passivity. In the category of Florence and Ida Scott would come Julia Miller in *Just Above My Head*. Julia is comparable to Florence in her jealousy of her brother Jimmy, although that journey is not as warranted as is Florence’s of Gabriel. Unlike Florence who craves for education, Julia simply announces to her mother, that she could not attend school because God had called her to ministry. She is carried away so much by this that she begins to act God. Her passivity stems from being immersed in her ministry.

Sharon Rivers in *If Beale Street Could Talk* is the active culmination of all the portraits of black mothers. In the words of Trudier Harris,

“Sharon is the quintessential mother whose very presentation evokes memories of those earlier mothers who were so ineffectual but whose desires to assist their children may have been just as strong as hers.

Sharon has the advantage of a supportive Husband who is not in conflict with either of his children and who would stand by her, with them, through any crisis. She becomes mother to highlight all the earlier portraits of mothers” (P 147).

Sharon is the ideal example of an active and daring mother.

It is said that Baldwin’s life mission was to see the togetherness of the Blacks, that too, in living together in harmony and inequality. He used his intellectualism, his writings and oratorical skill towards this mission. He himself said once: “If intend to survive and get my work done” (Weatherby 197). Throughout his life, Baldwin wrote untiringly for the people who were brought to America in chains, who worked hard for the country and those who got freed from slavery. Baldwin by his writings shook the conscience of the country and woke up the people to reality and truth. He believed that the key to end the colour problem was ‘Love’. He said that the Blacks survived in America through the heavy days of slavery and beyond only because of the love they had for one another;

“If we had not loved each other none of us would have survived. And now you must survive because we love you, and for the sake of your children and your children’s children” (First Next Time 22).

To conclude, to Baldwin’s belief in love as the key to survival, was added to theme of unity of the blacks. He wanted them to actively involve in the struggle against oppression. It is complementary to women and motherhood that the mothers in the novels of Baldwin stand loftily for both the themes

of love and action. All female characters picturized by Baldwin are living embodiments of sacrificial motherhood.

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