



Intersections of Race, Sexuality, and Gender in James Baldwin's 'Giovanni's Room'

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Abstract:

James Baldwin is one of the greatest artists of the postmodern era. It will not be an overstatement to say that no author has shaped the narrative of race, sexuality, and gender in Black America, apart from Toni Morrison. *Giovanni's Room* (1956) is a powerful testament to Baldwin's creative and technical genius. The oeuvre of this great writer is very contemporary, even though they were written years

ago. This paper intends to examine the racial, sexual, and gender intersections of the said novel. With a close look at feminist thinkers like Toril Moi and Sara Ahmed, sexuality and gender biases are overall addressed. This paper puts an effort to decipher how race and sexuality predominate over people in due course. Despite being a homosexual man himself, Baldwin has to paint homosexuals as powerless and akin to darkness or blackness while heterosexuality rules over as the powerful one. Female characters are relatively weak and granted much space or thought. On top of that, inherent racism pervades the novel like a spear. This paper delves deeper into the realm of dynamics and power struggles, vis-à-vis race, sexuality, and gender.

Keywords: Race, gender, sexuality, homosexual, heterosexual, dynamics, power, contemporary, intersection.

Introduction

James Baldwin is an African-American author whose novels and essays explore the complexities of human life concerning race, sex, sexuality, gender, class, and many other layers. *Giovanni's Room* (1956) is one such novel where the protagonist, David, oscillates in ambivalent sexual orientations. The confessional narrative technique adopted in this novel offers a closer look into David's psyche. His ambivalent sexual orientation, always remaining "in motion," are the results of so many interactive forces like fixed hegemonic masculinity, race, state-sanctioned homophobia, and class. A proper understanding of the masculine dilemma faced by David or the subordination of Giovanni requires research on these interactive and intersectional forces.

Giovanni and Baldwin

Giovanni's Room, now considered a landmark achievement in Gay and Lesbian literature, is, as Caryl Phillip puts it "by any standards, audacious" (viii). It is a book about homosexuality, published in the post-war era America, a period when homosexuality was an

offendable crime, and the 'offenders' were put to forever 'silence.' The most astonishing part is that the author is a Black man and the novel deals with all-white characters, which was and still date, is a pretty rare phenomenon. White reviewers were adamant that the novel was not focused on African American experience; several Black reviewers connected homosexuality to whiteness and branded it as a 'White desire,' Most of them dismissed the whole concept due to the prevalent homophobia. Honestly, this novel defied any classifications or tags. James Baldwin's works were spurred in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, and Baldwin's character is an inspiration for Ta-Nehesi Coates' much-discussed novel *Between the World and Me*- the novel has been able to gain a following across the globe.

White masculinity as the dominant sexual trait

Conneell defines hegemonic masculinity to be "the configuration of gender practice which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. Hegemonic masculinity requires stigmatization of homosexual men in order to maintain the powerful position of patriarchy in case of access to power (77-78)." David was brought up in such a culture that subordinates every being apart from heteronormative man. Which become clear in David's father's wish- "all I want for David is that he grows up to be a man" (Baldwin 20). David's "immaculate manhood" therefore has almost nothing to do with his biological orientation and everything to do with cultural appropriation of a particular brand of manhood. David's sexual "preference" of Hella over Giovanni is often trivialized even in his thoughts. Although David's love for Giovanni goes through layers of suppression, and David's love for Hella is an act of enforced determination, the spectral presence of Giovanni is always there. After Hella's return in the novel, this becomes clear.

"I told myself I would not think about Giovanni yet; I would not worry about him yet; for tonight, anyway, Hella and I should be together with nothing to divide us. Still, I knew very well that this was not possible: he

had already divided us. I tried not to think of him sitting alone in that room, wondering why I stayed away so long.” (Baldwin 108)

As any other hegemony works, masculine hegemony works behind the conscious mind of David to make him abhor transgender people. His reaction to the transgender post office boy can be exemplified in this case.

“People said that he was very nice, but I confess that his utter grotesqueness made me uneasy; perhaps in the same way that the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people’s stomach.” (Baldwin 30)

His reaction to Jacque's homosexuality is quite similar. David's ambivalence results from the dialectic battle between his determined self that wants to maintain his privileged position as a white man in the society, and his emotional self that wants to embrace his love. The problem that David faces is analyzed properly by Dwan Henderson Simmons.

“David houses his subordinate self—the one who can be with Joey or Giovanni, defying gender norms.... Yet, in another segment of his mind, there is a perceived dominant masculine force that not only casts his subordinate self as feminized and dark, but also calls for its extinction.” (68)

According to Simmons, white male identity is built upon a “homophobic foundation” (65). David considers homosexuality as a virus and turns away from Jacques and Giovanni for being homosexual. Whereas, both Jacques and Giovanni seem to understand David's condition better and tries to convince him into reality.

“You are not leaving me for her. You are leaving me for some other reason. You lie so much, you have come to believe all your own lies. But I, I have senses. You

are not leaving me for a woman. If you were really in love with this little girl, you would not have had to be so cruel to me.” (Baldwin 125)

Gendered Identity of Hella and Sue

In the case of Hella, who seems at the beginning to be a person who values her independence and lightness the most, hegemonic masculinity plays an insidious role. At the beginning of the novel, Hella wants to lead a weightless life. She does not want to marry David before a proper thought. That same person wants to settle down for the fixed gender role even at her identity.

Another minor female character of the novel, Sue, suffers from at the hand of a stereotypical gendered conception of feminine beauty. She is described as “not pretty,” having “small breasts and a big behind.” She did not care for her sensuality or appearance. For the stereotypical conception of feminine beauty, she cannot find any partner and agrees to indulge in intercourse with David. In David’s contemplation, Sue’s situation becomes clear, “I knew that she was giving herself, not to me, but to that lover who would never come” (Baldwin 90). Baldwin, in this way, touches upon the fact how this patriarchal conceptualization of feminine beauty oppresses women.

The female body and ‘situatedness.’

Toril Moi, in her reading of Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, advances the idea of situatedness.

“The body is our perspective on the world, and the same time that body is engaged in dialectical interaction with its surroundings, that is to say with all other situations in which the body is placed. The way we experience- live-our bodies are shaped by this interaction. The body is historical sedimentation of our way of living in the world, and the world’s way is living with us.”(68).

Put, the environment, and exposure shape bodies, and vice versa, working to produce both not as neutral or objective but as infused with history and ideology. It regards normativity as not merely an idea or ideological standpoint, rather physical and material as well-it is encoded in various ways.

Sara Ahmed emphasizes bodies and entities at odds with normativity-she examines how this dialectical relationship that Moi proposes produces dissonance, rejection, and oddity as much as it does belonging. While the body is central to her theories, space becomes a more specified focus for unraveling how identities form to be exact. Ahmed writes that spaces “take shape through the habitual action of bodies” and that “spaces acquire the shape of bodies that inhabit them.” (156).

When it comes to whiteness, for example, Ahmed explicitly states, “If the world is made white.” She writes, “then they body-at-home one that can inhabit whiteness” (153).

Racial tension (Black vs. White dichotomy?)

James Baldwin, is an African-American author, is automatically attached to the theme of race in most of the critical works written on him. *Giovanni's Room* seems free from it, but a closer look reveals how he metaphorically represents the theme of race and how it is necessary in understanding the novel. If manhood is one of the “joy and pride” in David's life, another one is his race. In the beginning paragraph of the novel, David celebrates his white ancestors alongside his looks (Baldwin 10). According to Nancy Sanchez, “race inherently mimics gender through similar binary structure” (2). According to Josep M Armengol, in *Giovanni's Room*, race and sexuality are “virtually interchangeable.” Homosexuality is associated with darkness or blackness, whereas heterosexuality has been linked with whiteness. The white-black dichotomy in *Giovanni's Room* is bound with homosexuality-heterosexuality (674-675). In the morning after intercourse with Joey, David felt Joey's body to be the “black opening of a cavern” (Baldwin 14). Black and darkness have been continuously associated with Joey

and Giovanni. Whereas the purity, innocence, rationality has been attached to heterosexuality and whiteness. Giovanni is Italian, and therefore not black. Nevertheless, his slightly colored complexion makes David consider him inferior to him (Baldwin 36-37). So, it can be easily said; the racial tension also propagates the sexual tension in this novel.

Baldwin creates a transnational situation in *Giovanni's Room* to look deeply into the issue of homophobia. To understand David's psyche, it is necessary to understand the cultural condition of the country in which he was born. In the novel, it seems that Jacques, Giovanni, or even Guillaume could accept their homosexuality. Although Jacques is an American, he was born in Belgium and settled in France for a long time, and it could be one of the reasons behind his acceptance of homosexuality. *Giovanni's Room* was published during the cold war period when "the country was dominated by the Cold War Discourse against both communists and homosexuals" (Armengol 671). American homophobia still exists. However, when the novel was published, same-sex sexual acts were considered a crime, as stated before. A survey report entitled *State-Sponsored Homophobia* by Aengus Carol shows that acceptance of homosexual people in the United States Penal Codes came a long time after the novel was written. Before the state of Illinois repealed the law against same-sex sexual acts in 1962, it was punished with imprisonment, which differed from state to state (34). The least punishment being two years and the most extraordinary 60 years of imprisonment.

On the other hand, France had legalized same-sex sexual acts after the French Revolution in 1791 and Italy in 1890 (Carol 36). This analysis of penal codes seems necessary to understand David's condition. In *Giovanni's Room*, David uses the legal terminology of "crime" several times to discuss his homosexual relationship with Giovanni.

"Chez toi, everything sounds extremely feverish and complicated, like one of those Englishmurdermysterries. To find out, you keep saying, as though we were

accomplices in a crime. We have not committed any crime.” He [Giovanni] poured the cognac.

“It’s just that she’ll be terribly hurt if she does find out, that’s all. People have very dirty words for—for this situation.” I stopped. His face suggested that my reasoning was flimsy. I added, defensively, “Besides, it is a crime—in my country and, after all, I didn’t grow up here, I grew up there.” (75)

David’s reaction to homosexuality has, thus, another layer of an instigator. There is no mention in the novel that Jacques wants to return to America. But David does. Furthermore, his homophobia has legal reasons too. This is not to say, Giovanni, Jacques or Guillaume does not have to go through discrimination living in France. However, at least, they could be free of the fear of imprisonment because of their homosexuality.

Giovanni’s suffering in France resulted from not only being a homosexual person but also his economic status. Guillaume wanted Giovanni to indulge in sex with him because he offered him the job. The exploitation of the working class in the hand of the aristocrat adds another layer of significance to this novel. Giovanni’s killing of Guillaume, too, is an outcome of a combination of several layers of trauma. Giovanni would be saved, had David been loyal to him.

Conclusion

Baldwin, in *Giovanni’s Room*, tries to pursue the human condition in all its intersections. This novel portrays how hegemonic masculinity and homophobia create conflicts in the human psyche and how this very conflict needs to be understood by looking through all the intersections; race, class, nationality, and so much more.

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Shuvro Das is an enthusiast of literature, culture and human life. He has completed his B.A (Hons.) in English and M.A in Literature in English and Cultural Studies from Jahangirnagar University. His research interests include, but are not limited to postcolonialism, contemporary and popular literature, Cultural Studies, Gender Studies, Rhetoric and Composition. He is currently working as an independent researcher and has a dream of having a PhD in future.



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