

Gender and Sexuality in James Baldwin's Giovanni's Room

Ms. Kavita^{1*} Dr. Arun Kumar Mishra²

¹ Research Scholar, C.C.S. University Meerut, Uttar Pradesh

² Associate Professor, Department of English, Lajpat Rai (PG) College, Sahibabad, Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh

Abstract – James Baldwin, a novelist, essayist, playwright and social critic, is one of the most appreciated writers of America. He was one of the first American writers and, black writer, to portray homosexuality. Baldwin argues throughout his second novel Giovanni's Room that an honest sense of one's gender and sexuality can only be attained through a personal journey that involves more than just movement from one point to another; it must also lead to a change within and an acceptance of self. In Giovanni's Room (1956), the main character David travels a journey devoid of personal growth and acceptance. A white, homosexual man, David finds himself trapped in a white, straight, masculine American ideal which does not define him. He spends the novel trying to outrun and reject his past and that aspect of his gender identity which he wishes to ignore. Baldwin establishes self-reflection to be the only means of creating a gender identity that is able to balance acceptance with self-invention. Baldwin's believes that every American must undertake an honest journey of self-discovery in order to establish an inclusive rather than exclusive gender identity.

Key Words – Gender, Sexuality, Homosexuality, Heterosexuality, Homophobia, Gender Identity, Gay, Masculinity.

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INTRODUCTION

Giovanni's Room opens with a reflection on gender and sexuality. David, the main character, studies his reflection in the window as he contemplates a kind of ancestral movement through space, mentioning that his ancestors "conquered a continent, pushing across death-laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faced away from Europe and into a darker past" (3). This darker past is that of a country in which sexual and gender identities are lost and denied: lost because the immigrants have left their homelands in an attempt to start a new life, and denied because the roar of the majority silences the voice of the minority. The roar of the American majority is answered by the voice of Baldwin, who as both a black and a gay man, truly embodies the struggle of the minority to understand itself and to find its place. While taking an active role in the American civil rights movements, Baldwin could not ignore the issues of African Americans' homosexuality and in *Giovanni's Room*, took up the issue of gender and sexual identity quite openly. His treatment of gender identity and equality is still relevant today and his words penned fifty years ago in response to the fight for racial equality evoking feelings of frustration and hope that resonate in the current struggle to achieve equal rights for homosexuals have the impact even today. Both the Afro-American race and their homosexuality are traits

that cannot be changed, and so such traits, must be accepted before one can move forward in life.

OBJECTIVE

Most of today's society understands that there is no single concept of sexuality. However, the concept of man falling in love with a woman and vice versa has been introduced and taught for ages that it seems impossible for people to acknowledge different forms of love. Heterosexuality, as it is called, uniforms the idea of sexual identity that it is the most appropriate and, therefore, it has become the norm for people looking for a relationship. Homosexuality, on the other hand, is considered as the alien concept for people who grasp their beliefs in heterosexuality. The thought of living a normal life as a homosexual in a heterosexual world can be deemed impossible. Even though one's sexuality is a part of human rights, this matter does not really allow the homosexuals freedom to express their sexuality directly or indirectly. The situation happens because of the society in which they live; the society that rejects them. The aim and objective of this paper is study *Giovanni's Room* and find out how Baldwin has pleaded through this novel that homosexuality is also a normal sexuality and, like David, one should

accept one's real sexual identity, instead of hiding it, or rejecting it, or living in self-denial.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The issues concerning gender and sexuality have been dealt with by many critics in research articles and journals. Ralph Gallagher paper titled "Understanding the Homosexual" which was published in *The Furrow* in 1979 discussed sexuality, gender and its prejudice and fear that marginalised the queer. He talked about the growing issues of homosexuality in society and its sensitive attitude on sexual minorities who were treated as outcast and rejected. Furthermore, Gallagher argued that the attitude towards homosexuality rose from how people legitimized the sexual orientation and individual that bears it. Joseph M. Armengol in his paper titled "In the Darkroom: Homosexuality and as Blackness in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*" which was published in *Signs* in 2012 emphasised the dominant's power in both ethnic culture and sexuality. The journal, "In the Darkroom: Homosexuality and/ as Blackness in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*" claimed that the author gave such firm critics towards both racism and homophobia through David's life and his relationships.

HYPOTHESIS

The paper presumes that orthodoxy and conservatism still exist in the matter of sexuality and the concept of homosexuality as a normal human desire is rejected by the society where heterosexuality is the norm. Homosexuality is discussed in the context of political conservatism and gender discrimination. These factors pay the way of categorization as majority and minority in the heterosexual society. As heterosexuality is a majority, homosexuals became individualistic, lack of self-esteem discriminated and alienated based on their sexuality. Baldwin is one of the Afro-American novelists who has taken up this issue quite boldly in his second novel *Giovanni's Room* and made a strong appeal to treat homosexuality as normal sexuality. Social circumstances prevented David to live his life in a way he wanted to be but in the end of the novel he rejects social bondages and accepts what he really is i.e. his homosexuality.

DISCUSSION

James Baldwin, an African American activist and acclaimed essayist of "Notes of a Native Son" receives negative backlash for his second novel, *Giovanni's Room* due to its explicit homoerotic content in 1956. Although it is majorly recognized as a white gay novel. David's inability to accept his same sex desires push him to pursue and maintain traditional masculinity as well as upholding, his racial status as a form of power. The hierarchical structure of the gender binary that perceives masculinity to be superior in comparison to femininity is similar to the hierarchy of races, in which white is perceived to be the dominant race in comparison to black/non-white races. As a

result, race inherently mimics gender through a similar binary structure that allows David to use both race and he performance of gender as an act of power. Thus, whiteness and masculinity become interchangeable, at least for David. Consequently, whiteness is then performed through masculinity and blackness/non-white is performed through femininity, and vice versa.

Baldwin points out that the notion of power is not only linked to gender and sexuality, but it also ties into sexuality. Joseph M. Armengol in "In the Dark Room: Homosexuality in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*", considers homosexuality as a literal and metaphorical symbol for blackness. *Giovanni's Room's*, depiction of bisexuality creates a duality of identity that allows David to access masculinity, at least perform masculinity and ascertain his whiteness and "power" through heteronormative behaviour. David, who plays an important role in the novel and as a hero, in *Giovanni's Room*, a young white American living in Paris and who is attracted to both women and men. It causes much turmoil in David that he has attraction for men, because he is unable to accept and celebrate his sexuality with Hella, who he wants to marry and settle with. This creates a rampant homophobic perception of sexuality that David projects on nonconforming, gender fluid men, and at times imposes on him. For example, while hanging in a notorious queer bar, David begins to criticize people who do not follow the heteronormative performance of gender and sexuality in noting a boy who worked all day in the post office "who come out at night wearing a makeup and earrings and with his heavy blond hair piled high. Sometimes he actually wore a skirt and high heels... people said that he was very nice, but (he) confess that his utter grotesqueness made him uneasy; perhaps in the same way that the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people's stomachs" (27). In detailing his disgust for the postal office boy's after an hour activities, David exemplify his unwillingness to accept gender and sexual fluidity. David is not able to accept his sexuality and enable his homophobic tendencies. A man performing femininity though the act of dressing up as a woman challenges David's perception of masculinity and its correlation to sex, for men can only be masculine and women can only be feminine. In doing this, David is not only limiting others from gender and sexual expression, but he is also limiting himself to fixed notions of gender and sexuality, which causes him to deny his attraction to men and run away from his same sex desires. In David's eyes if someone were to engage with a man sexually, they must at least maintain their masculinity because of the fact that they were born as a biological male.

Moreover, David creates a dynamic personality that places him as superior to everyone else around him because he is not overtly queer by maintaining his masculinity. He views transgender people in the bar as inferior, at least inferior in comparison to him because they are engaging in a non-heteronormative gender performance. Here, David believes he is

performing the appropriate and "natural" of masculinity because he is male, and gender performance as a result, he believes that he is superior to the men in the bar, who are feminine. Also, in claiming that he "always found it difficult to believe they (office boy and transwomen) ever went to bed with anybody" (27), David continues to build a hierarchical chain that places him, a masculine male on the top and people who perform multiple genders on the bottom. Interestingly enough, David considers homosexuality to be better than being transgender for "a man who wanted a man would certainly not want one of them" (27). As a result, David limits the homosexual identity to one that is defined through heteronormativity that forces biological males to be masculine. To, David, they are not just less than him, they are less than homosexuals, for their performance and not sexuality. David has a problem with feminine males and expects them to maintain their masculinity identity if they are going to engage in homoerotic behaviour.

David distrusts his instincts and his identity. Baldwin notes that "the person who distrusts himself has no touchstone for reality for this touchstone can be only oneself. Such a person interposes between himself and reality. Nothing less than a labyrinth of attitudes (Down at the cross Essays 312). David is, in such a labyrinth, where his only touchstone is an American masculine identity that does not match his reality as a gay man. The labyrinth leads to a sense to disorder, and David becomes more utterly lost with each false turn.

David first homosexual experience occurs when he is a teenager, staying the night with his friend Joey. When he tries to face the confusion that this encounter elicits, he finds himself in "a maze of false signals and abruptly locking doors," too disordered to make sense of the experience (10). Later, David once again gets himself confused about his sexuality, and the "frightening disorder of Giovanni's Room reflects the disorder of his own sexuality (87). David faces the crisis about his sexual identity as he says that he "wanted to be inside again, with light and safety, with my manhood unquestioned, watching my woman put my children to bed" (104). David's view of masculinity is indicative of the time in which he lives: he wishes to conform to the 1950s ideal of the white, middle-class family with a working father, stay-at-home mother, and a house in the suburbs. He wishes to fulfil this image of manhood, for he goes on to refer to his search for a more meaningful place, stating that he wants a "woman to be for me steady ground, like the earth itself" (104).

In an effort to remain on the safe ground of heterosexual virile and American masculinity, David asks Hella to marry him, seeking in her "the possibility of legitimate surrender" (20). But during their first night together after being reunited, he realizes her again, as though she were a familiar, darkened room in which I fumbled to find the light" (121). Through Hella, David continues to adhere to the American masculine ideal: he wants to leave the dark and filth of

homosexuality behind by taking up residence in the light of a heterosexual relationship. Hella eventually becomes a space as sinister as that held by David's mother, and he reacts to her with the same feelings of emasculation that his father feels towards his mother: her underclothes "began to seem anaesthetic and unclean... and when I entered her I began to feel that I would never get out alive" (158).

David continues his search of his sexuality to find himself. He thoughts that the emotional turmoil and psychological ails he faces at home in America are the result of his geographical surroundings, in reality, they lie within his psychological landscape. He refuses, however, to confront the source of his troubles and flees to Paris in an attempt to evade strict American ideals of heterosexuality, masculinity, and moral cleanliness. Yet once in Paris, he balks at the city's griminess and flamboyant displays of sexuality, failing to find solace. When he visits to Guillaume's bar, he shows his negative attitude towards homosexuality is positioned as an American construct, contrasted against the pervasive homosexuality present in the bar and more generally within his Parisian social circle.

In contrast to David's search for clarity, the dark and grimy setting of Guillaume's bar creates a sense of disorder. He states that living with Giovanni initially "held a joy and amazement... Beneath the joy, of course, was anguish, and beneath that amazement was fear" (75), indicating a modicum of self-reflection. David explains the cause of his discomfort. Giovanni's Room represents sets of paradoxical feelings, while the familiar constructs of heteronormativity and gender once comforted David, they become the sources of anxiety and imprisonment in Giovanni's Room. The room represents the possibility of intimacy, both physical and emotional feelings. Despite David's inability to fully reject his American heterosexual ideals creates a sense of anxiety that prevents him from accepting his relationship with Giovanni in its natural form.

David must reconcile himself with the fact that he is both a masculine American man, as well as someone who feels attraction towards both men and women Giovanni's lenses allows David the freedom to view himself without shame, forcing David to confront his sexual fluidity in a manner that he was previously unable to accomplish.

Giovanni quarrels with David over this very issue, saying that David behaves "as through we were accomplices to a crime. We have not committed any crime" (81). David argues from the American perspective of homosexuality he says to Giovanni that it is not a crime from his point of view but in David's country, it is a crime. People have very dirty words for-for this situation. Giovanni is tormented by the guilt of his past, and to him the room is a disordered, cluttered, and sometimes suffocating projection of his "punishment and grief" (Baldwin 87). Giovanni struggles with his masculinity after the

death of his child, "a little boy" who "would have been wonderful, strong man" (139). However, he escapes self-deception by leaving his wife behind and embracing his homosexuality. David, on the other hand, is trapped by his adherence to an ideal that says homosexuality is dirty and wrong.

FINDINGS

As the novel, *Giovanni's Room* is about a same sex desire between David and Giovanni. David, the main character, represents the sexual minorities like lesbian, gay homosexual, bisexual, transgender who while living in a society where homosexuality is the norm often feel confused, humiliated and alienated. So, like David, they are hesitant to accept the reality and to express their identity, and be true to even their own feelings. They are under dilemma and pressure they receive for being the homosexuals in a heterosexual society. Through the novel Baldwin attempted to uncover the hardships of a gay for being different with society's expectations and his identity.

The novel suggests that natural feelings and sexuality cannot be suppressed and denied for long. Throughout the novel, David believes that he could be happy with either Hella, but his failure to confront his own nuanced self-identity cripples the possibility of a romantic relationship with a partner of any gender. Ultimately, David is left alone in a state of ambiguity, both emotionally and physically. He is neither with a man nor a woman, but harbours differing levels of attraction to both; in this state of loss and isolation, in which David can neither cling to an American nor to a French identity: neither Hella nor Giovanni, that he finally seeks to define himself outside the restrictions of social binaries.

Through David's final decision, the author encouraged people, especially those whose living in uncertainties, to live the life they have always wanted and be honest with them. Instead of being anxious, people should feel grateful and believe in the grace of God. Baldwin encourages people belonged in the minority group to have an optimistic attitude towards the condition and the situation they lived in. They need to face the harsh reality when they are often mistreated, but never overlook the happiness and freedom to live a life they are endowed with.

CONCLUSION

Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* is one of the representative Afro-American novel in the matter of bold treatment of alternative sexuality like homosexuality and bisexuality. David's character indicates how the homosexual individuals and bisexuals can overcome the conflicts and pressure related to their sexuality and accept their true sexuality; express their genuine feelings and choose the life and the life partner one wanted. Baldwin's himself once said that he encouraged people, who lived a life being the minority group in the society, to

have the optimistic attitude, to express their true self, and not to give up easily even through there are many pressures. In the novel, David, as a homosexual individual often runs away and always tries to deny his feelings or his desires. His fear and worry puts him in an endless conflict about his sexuality, whether he needs to repress it or to reject it. Baldwin portrays the conflict that David needs to overcome for being the homosexual individual who lives in the heterosexual society with dignity and self-respect.

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Corresponding Author

Ms. Kavita*

Research Scholar, C.C.S. University Meerut, Uttar
Pradesh

kavitabansla5233@gmail.com