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Locating Connections: The Alienated Soul of James Baldwin

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Francis Bacon in his essay, "Of Friendship," has rightly said that "Crowd is not company; and faces are but gallery of pictures" (Qtd. in *Essays, Civil and Moral* 27). We all need an emotional anchor, a connection which may hold our life with what or whom we are attached. The canvass of our life is filled with many beautiful colors, if we are connected to it and the anchor is strong. But in this post-modern world the connection among human beings is conditioned, and acceptance depends upon the ideological terms of race, gender, caste and physical attributes. Difference of these said features does not diminish the humanity of someone. But the prejudice of the dominant class creates unseen barriers which separate people. People all over the globe have their share of sufferings. Physical wound can be healed up, but the one inflicting the soul of a human is ever tormenting. Alienation is one such wound which causes a long journey of a human being for locating connections. Through various routes, he tries to get to his roots. One such example is James Baldwin, a representative of Afro-Americans, who was torn between two worlds—Black and White—in the United States of America. It has been rightly suggested by Henry Louis Gates Jr. that: "If Martin Luther King's was the oratorical spoken voice of the Civil Rights Movement, James Baldwin's was its intellectual written Voice" (*The African-American Century* 237).

James Baldwin was an afro-American novelist and essayist who portrayed the pain of being twice removed from his roots in his works. He was born in America, but the racial atmosphere of his motherland forced him to lead a life of a gypsy. In his own words, he was born in exile. The roots of his forefathers were in Africa, so in a way, he was once removed from his roots. Then he

had to leave America and settle first in Paris and then in Switzerland in search of an 'imaginary homeland'. And in this way he is twice removed from his roots. His was the greatest misfortune that the country of his birth, whose foundations were laid down by his forefathers, denied recognition to him. But his soul could not accept existence out of his own country. Such was the dilemma of an artist who, along with his kin, was alienated within his own self and his own country. This pain of separation from his own people and country made his life wretched. Baldwin penned down his feeling of alienation and its effects in most of his works like: *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), *The Fire Next Time* (1963), *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), *No Name in the Street* (1972), *The Price of the Ticket* (1985) etc. His interviews were also full of agonizing experiences.

The sense of alienation is always in proportion to attachment. The stronger the attachment, the greater will be the pain of alienation. In the case of James Baldwin, both the things were in extreme throughout his life. But he made his suffering his strength, a kind of bridge to claim unconditional affinity with the United States of America, what though one-sided. In an Interview with Nikki Giovanni, he said that: "At some point you have to realize that your suffering does not isolate you, your suffering is your bridge" (Qtd. in *A Dialogue: James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni* 46). Why did he think so? It is because he, as a writer, felt his responsibility towards his country and countrymen. He cherished the dream of an American society wherein people would not be divided on the basis of color and race. And to actualize this dream he battles with American society not to defeat it, but to win its faith and love. He announces, in his essay "The Creative Process" that: ". . . the war of an artist with his society is a lover's war, and he does, at his best, what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself and, with that revelation, to make freedom real" (*The Price of the Ticket* 318).

Baldwin was born in a white racist society of America which was very hostile to the people of color. Child Baldwin was ignorant about this color line. He did not discriminate between white and black, and was equally attached to them. The innocence of child was shaken many a time by the warnings which he received from his father and other black people. But he retained

his faith in America feeling him to be a part of it. His humanist values forced him to understand the real meaning of the words like civil and Christian. Ironically enough, he understood it by being among the most uncivil and unchristian people, and both blacks and whites were among them.

It is true that the mother is the first teacher of a child. Whatever humanists values Baldwin has, have been given by his mother. It is she who taught him to be civil. She told him to show respect to the white ladies irrespective of the fact (Which history contained) that the black women had been subjected to all sort of indignities by white people. In his conversation with Margaret Mead recorded in *A Rap on Race* (1971) Baldwin Says:

I was fourteen and I was taught by my mother to always stand up on subways and give a seat to a woman. But some of the preachers told me that I should never give my seat to a white woman . . . This gave me a tremendous conflict for a while . . . I solved this problem very neatly by never sitting down in the subway . . . I had to think about it and think it through myself and decide weather a woman's color is more important then the fact that she is woman (47).

Such was the bond of Baldwin with his people, who never thought of any kind of separation from whites believing them to be his own. He narrates an incident where he accompanies his friend to his church. On being asked "whose little boy are you?" by the pastor, Baldwin replies: "Why yours" (*The Fire Next Time* 29). This again shows that Baldwin had formed an affinity with everyone.

But his quest for being loved and accepted was shattered by and by and he felt a kind of isolation from his own people, black as well as white and from God also. One who has put his utmost faith in love and fraternity, if the same person in confronted with almost opposite situations, naturally he will feel cheated, and lonely. Baldwin says: ". . . it was as though I were yelling up to Heaven and Heaven would not hear me. And if Heaven would not hear me, if love could not descend from Heaven . . . Then utter disaster was my portion" (*The Fire Next Time* 30).

Baldwin's works describe his process of realization that he

lives in a racist society in which his existence is hardly noticed. Living in his own country, paradoxically enough, he was out of it. As he writes in "The American Dream and the American Negro" (1965): "It comes as a great shock to discover that the country which is your birthplace and to which you owe your life and identity has not, in its whole system of reality, evolved any place for you" (*Collected Essays* 715).

White America did not accept him which leads him to find out where does he belong to? He felt like an alien in his own motherland. He was standing in the middle of a road, one end leading towards Africa, the other into American mainstream from his marginalized position. Both ways had their own difficulty. Certainly he could not go back to Africa. Alex Haley poses this problem in *Roots* (1976): "After I've found out where I come from, I can't understand a word they're saying" (680). On the other hand, white America relegated him to a secondary position. That precisely is the problem of blacks who neither can go back and nor cannot be all Americans. They inhabit two worlds--one African and one American--within them. W.E.B. Du. Bois writes in *The Souls of the Black Folk* (1905) that:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unrecognized strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (3).

Racial discrimination made it impossible for Baldwin to continue his writing career in America. So Baldwin had to leave his mother country. But there was no home for Baldwin anywhere. France and Switzerland made him more lonely and nostalgic. His works while living abroad clearly shows his helplessness as to what he should do to change the situation. His soul was torn inside as he told Margaret Mead: "I am an exile. But I was an exile long before I went away. Because the terms on which my life was offered to me in my country were . . . entirely intolerable and

unacceptable . . . My country drove me out. The Americans drove me out of my country" (*A Rap on Race* 220-221).

Baldwin had a lot of reasons to be angry but he never let it overpower his hope. Despite his separation from his country; despite his alienation from his own people; and despite all that he was forced to endure, he always thought himself to be an American. He showed America his complex fate and experience wherein he found it difficult to go and meet happily his kinsfolk; found it difficult to love his white brother; found it difficult to live in America; found it difficult to leave it; found it difficult to live abroad; and found it difficult to make lies with his African roots. As he said: ". . . this depthless alienation from oneself and one's own people, in sum, is the American Experience" (*Notes of a Native Son* 89).

But Baldwin made this his strength, not his weakness. The world into which he was born seemed to work against his talent, trying to crush him down, but he dealt with it in a different way. First he took full authority and connected himself completely with America, then in a frank and honest manner criticized the wrongs of his people and country. As he stated: "I love America more than any other country in the whole world, and exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually" (*Notes* 9). He had made his 'truce' with the reality of his existence, yet one cannot fail to see the unspoken pain of alienation behind his words:

I know, in any case, that the most crucial time in my own development came when I was forced to recognize that I was a kind of bastard of the West; when I followed the line of my past I did not find myself in Europe but in Africa . . . I was an interloper; this was not my heritage. At the same time I had no other heritage which I could possibly hope to use . . . I would have to appropriate these white centuries. I would have to make them mine – I would have to accept my special attitude, my special place in this scheme – otherwise I would have no place in *any* scheme (*Notes of a Native Son* 78).

James Baldwin died on December 1, 1987. It was his misfortune that he could not live happily in America and died

with an incomplete hope on a foreign soil. His sense of alienation again gets reflected in his essay "The New Lost Generation" (1960) where he says that: "the people who hate this country can never manage, except physically, to leave it, and have a wretched life wherever they go" (*Collected Essays* 663). His exile was self-imposed, but his distance from his country brought him even closer to it. On the foreign soil, he found out that he could never get far away from America. Ironically enough, it was outside America that he was known as an American, whereas he was hardly accepted inside it.

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