

James Baldwin's 'If Beale Street Could Talk', a testimony of Love, Support and Hope amidst the turmoil of Racial Injustice

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Abstract

James Baldwin as an author brought a revolution in American literature. Through his works Baldwin portrayed the plight of the Blacks in the unjust White American Society. Moreover, he became the voice of the Blacks and also put forth the personal, social, psychological and emotional trauma of the blacks, gay and bisexual men. 'If Beale Street Could Talk', published in 1974 brings out the importance of familial love and support in the time of crisis. Baldwin made an attempt to present this novel from women's perspective, portraying Tish, the protagonist as his first female narrator. The novel is adapted into a movie by Barry Jenkins, by the same name and was released in the year 2018. The film opens with a quote from Baldwin's text:

Every black person born in America was born on Beale Street, born in the black neighbourhood of some American city, whether in Jackson, Mississippi, or in Harlem, New York. Beale Street is our legacy.

In *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Baldwin writes a novel from a woman's perspective for the first time, making Tish his first female narrator.

Keywords: Baldwin. Love, hope, racism, African-American literature

Introduction:

James Baldwin, an American author, also an activist, was born in Harlem in 1924. He was a prolific writer and played a significant role during the Civil Rights Movement of America. Due to his intense and visionary writings he is recognized as one of the prominent authors of the 20th century American literature. Baldwin in his literary career, published varied essays and novels. Most of his writings were influenced and dominated by his personal experiences. His writings portray the illustrations and occurrences of social injustice, racial discrimination, class conflict, sexual waywardness, quest of black people for their identity in the American society. In the series of his novels, 'If Beale Street Could Talk' as his fifth novel was published in 1974, focusing on the themes of love, hope, faith, parental care and racial discrimination. Baldwin a strong and an expressive American voice through his novels, gave a stark presentation of the social injustice and racial discrimination faced by the Blacks and his efforts to stand by them.

Interweaving the themes of Love, Support, and Hope

The scars of racism in every Afro - American are deep-rooted. Nobody is untouched by this evil and has greatly suffered the consequences of breathing in a racist society. Racism in the United States has been deep-rooted and prevalent in society since the colonial era. The white Americans always had the upper hand in society. They enjoyed all the benefits and the privileges, in contrast to the blacks and the people belonging to non - white races. They were deprived of even the basic needs resulting in their humiliation and insult at the hands of the whites.

If Beale Street Could Talk portrays the troubled life of Blacks in the cruel and unsympathetic world of Whites. The novel brings forth the harsh memories and experience of a young Black couple. The Black couple Fonny and Tish undergoes a challenging time at the hands of the White officials and thus leads a life full of depression and frustration.

Baldwin emphasizes the theme of love, particularly the love between the family members, and how it strengthens the people to face life's ordeals. At the same time, the novel also highlights the themes of racial injustice, hope, and religion in the American judicial and law enforcement systems through the characters of Tish and Fonny. It also narrates the family members' struggle in helping Fonny to bring him out of the jail for the crime he has not committed. The story is narrated by Tish.

As the novel opens, we come to know that Tish, who is nineteen, is pregnant with Fonny's child, and Fonny is in prison, despite being innocent. As Tish narrates the story, she recalls the grim past, acquainting the readers with the incidents in her parents' life, marriage, and her childhood association with Fonny. As Tish narrates to us about her mother's past, we learn the instances of injustice that her mother encountered due to racism prevalent in the society and how she couldn't fulfil her dream of becoming a singer.

If Beale Street Could Talk revolves around the consequences of social injustice and how the racial identity of Tish and Fonny leads to their discrimination. The series of unfortunate incidents in her life in regard to Fonny's case makes her realize that blacks are always considered to be inferior.

Misfortunes have become a part and parcel of Tish and Fonny's life. Their problems multiply when Fonny is falsely accused in the rape case of a Puerto Rican woman named Victoria Rogers. This tragedy further strengthens her disbelief in whites. In reality, it is the white policeman Officer Bell who swears that he saw Fonny running away from the scene of the crime. Officer Bell is known to be a racist and a liar, and thus everyone becomes suspicious –

‘If he saw Fonny at the scene of the crime, then why did he have to wait and come and get him out of the house?’

This indicates Officer Bell’s hatred or dislikes for Fonny and that he wants to prove him guilty at any cost. Mrs. Rogers’ statement to Mrs. Rivers with regards to her rape and Fonny makes the picture all the clearer that how Fonny is deliberately being troubled and tortured- They took me down there, and they asked me to pick him out, and I picked him out. That’s all.

Fonny had a great inclination towards sculpting, and at the same time, he was trying to be on his own. Tish and Fonny were desperately in search of a loft, but ironically being black, he faced problems in getting a decent loft for himself, he asserts, - this country do not like niggers. They do not like niggers so bad, man; they will rent to a leper first. I swear.’

Tish, Fonny, and their families were the constant victims of social injustice and prejudice, and thus their worries increased day by day. As Fonny’s lawyer is white, his father expresses his concern for his son –

I don’t want my boy’s life in the hands of those white ball-less motherfuckers. That’s only my son.

On the contrary, he is aware of the harsh fact that –

‘we all in the hands of white men.’

It’s unfortunate on the part of the blacks that the law and the justice don’t give them a chance to defend themselves, irrespective of whether they were involved in the crime or not.

Everything that Rivers’ do or say is done or said in that context. The baby in Tish’s womb is a prisoner yearning to be free as surely as her lover is a man in bondage longing to become himself through his love and his art. Tish says, —

‘I understand that the growth of the baby is concerned with his determination to be free. So, I don’t care if I get as two houses. The baby wants out. Fonny wants out. And we are going to make itll in time.’

The theme in *If Beale Street Could Talk* serves as a symbol of love, commitment, dedication, the faith, which provides an individual with the strength and belief to go through the odds of life. The motto is not to have sympathy for the Black people but to bring home the importance of familial love. The bond of love and understanding can help a person surpass every odd of life. It is proved to be true with the help of the protagonist Tish, who, along with the help and support of her family, strives hard and successfully releases Fonny out of prison, who is accused of the sin he had not done.

The members of the Rivers family are intricately united with each other to face any and every kind of racial oppression. The most important feature of the novel is the important image associated with Black womanhood, as through Tish, Baldwin allows the first Black woman to narrate her story. Baldwin's sense of achievement lies in seeing Tish's and Fonny's relationship prosper on the strength of the familial bond despite going through the harsh ordeals of the White world and judicial system dominated by the Whites. The child in Tish's womb is the only source of hope and faith for Tish and Fonny in particular and everyone in general.

As Tish walks through the prison walls, she feels like crossing the dense Sahara Desert surrounded by vultures-

“If you cross the Sahara, and you fall, by and by vulture's circle around you, smelling, sensing, your death. They circle lower and lower: they wait. They know. They know exactly when the flesh is ready when the spirit cannot fight back. The poor are always crossing the Sahara. And the lawyers and bonds-men and all that crowd circle around the poor, exactly like vultures. Of course, they're not any richer than the poor, really; that's why they've turned into vultures, scavengers, indecent garbage-men, and I'm talking about the black cats, too, who in so many ways are worse.”

Struggling with their black identity, Tish draws a parallel between zebras and the state of Blacks in New York City.

They looked at us as though we were zebras – and, you know, some people like zebras and some people don't. But nobody asks the zebra'.

Tish, Fonny, and their families are constantly traumatized for being Blacks and treated as inferior to others. Most of the black characters in the novel are the victims at the hands of Whites, and consequently, they hate Whites. On the contrary, Frank is unhappy, as Fonny's lawyer is white. He wishes that his son's life shouldn't be

‘in the hands of these white, ball-less motherfuckers’.

Tish finds the prisons as a dense desert with no end, and it's rather difficult to escape once trapped in it. The lawyers and the officers in the form of scavengers and vultures will squeeze the last drop within you, thus leaving you with guilt and shame to survive, if at all, all through your life. Therefore, every new day brings with it new challenges for the Rivers family. Ernestine acts as a savior for Tish. She is like a mother figure for Tish. Ernestine ascertains that Bell, a White cop, is responsible for Fonny's all troubles and has killed a twelve-year-old Black boy a few years before. Despite Fonny being falsely accused in the

rape case, he is entirely at the mercy of the judicial system; and as the case progresses at a snail's pace, things worsen. This is more evident as Ernestine (sister) tells Tish —
“We have to disprove the state's case. There's no point in saying that we have to make them prove it because, as far as they're concerned, the accusation is the proof.”

If *Beale Street Could Talk* is economically and politically constructed and arouses the hope of Blacks survival in America. The economic injustice and the dissociation of the people from society due to financial status are omnipresent in the novel.

Tish describes the drawbacks of the economic system and the different kinds of tactics used by various characters. She says:

Joseph is working overtime, double-time, and so is Frank. Ernestine has to spend less time with her children because she has taken a job as a part-time private secretary to a wealthy and eccentric young actress, whose connections she intends to intimidate and use. Joseph is coldly, systematically stealing from the docks, and Frank is stealing from the garment centre, and they sell the hot goods in Harlem or Brooklyn. They ... save their progeny from the jaws of this democratic hell.

Tish's family is a robust support system for her, helping her deal with the consequences of her black identity. Her mother is always there as her strength and gives her the right advice. She always makes her understand and functions her mind by saying that –

The only way anything ever gets done is when you make up your mind to do it'.

The journey from the point of Fonny's arrest to his release has been a difficult one for the Rivers' family with unpleasant memories and putting into hard labour to earn that extra money for Fonny's bail. All this compounded with the bitter experiences of the corrupt and the racial society. Tish and Fonny's baby is symbolic of a ray of new hope in society. Though the trial of Fonny is yet not over, and he is still in the shackles of the legal matters, but his release has united him with Tish and his child.

The racial identity of both Tish and Fonny had a significant impact on their lives and leaves them completely shattered and devastated. The struggles of Tish and her family in getting justice for Fonny throws light on the futile and void assurance of American democracy and, at the same time, the social injustice the common man experienced.

Conclusion:

Baldwin portrays the black man's oppressed life in unjust and unkind American society in his novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*. This novel follows the unpleasant experience of a young black couple. The protagonist Fonny and his lady love Tish lead a challenging life in the hostile land of America. They, only because of being blacks, become the victims of the unjust

American judicial system. This young couple who is exploited by the unjust American system of justice, is forced to survive a life in utter depression and frustration.

The lawmakers and the entire judiciary system are put at stake wherein they are shown giving cruel and inhuman treatment to innocent people, particularly the Blacks, thus misusing their power. The facts are distorted, thus making the life of the innocent Black people miserable and strengthening their belief in injustice, discrimination, and racial conflicts, thus cementing the feelings of hatred and violence in the society. On the contrary, as the novel proceeds towards its final episodes, Baldwin portrays the family as a strong unit which if united and woven with strong ties, can face every ordeal and odds of life and thus come victorious, come what may. The attempt to save the unborn child is used as a symbol that if peace and happiness prevail in the family in particular and society at a large, the world would be a better place for future generations to come.

Fonny, the protagonist represents the suffering Blacks under unjust society whereas, the white policeman Bell the antagonist represents the unkind American judicial system. Fonny and Tish's life is intruded by the police officer Bell. It is white, racist Bell who stands for white power and oppression exercised through American system of justice. Baldwin presents Bell as a representative of crude, inquisitive white power which spells physical and spiritual oppression for the Blacks

The unique quality of Tish's family is that they are united and share a strong bond with each other, always caring for each other and working for the betterment of each other. The first and foremost responsibility of the family is to free Fonny and help Tish and Fonny's child breathe in the fresh air of freedom. Tish inherited the quality of finding pride in one's own identity of being Black from her family. Throughout the whole story, the author counts on the blessings of having a powerful family and not feeling lonely in one's thick and thin of their life.

Baldwin in a subtle manner has expressed his anger and dismay over judicial miscarriage through the incident involving false indictment of Fonny as a rapist. Baldwin brings out very effectively all the elements of blatant injustice: the racist policeman, officer Bell, who needs a black rape suspect, the black youth Fonny, who is conveniently arrested and sent to jail without bond, and a deliberate and calculated move by white policeman to use law for conviction of an innocent black victim.

Tish, Fonny's fiancé is portrayed as a comforting and supporting soul to Fonny, while she herself is doubly discriminated as a black citizen of white America and a black woman in the black community. Even though she was left alone to save the life of her lover, the members

of her family lend their helping hands to her in their unique ways. It represents the need of communal bond among the members of an oppressed minority. After a long time, battle with the unjust society, Tish at last is able to bring out Fonny on bail.

Baldwin, even though, stresses the human bondage that exists within the black community to lead a safe and secured life in the imperial and racist society, he also recognizes the deep, universal bonds of emotions that tie the hearts of people regardless of their colour of skin. Baldwin in *If Beale Street Could Talk*, attempts to discover New America where the black citizens will be free from the injustice meted out to them.

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