

The Politics of Gender in James Baldwin's *Another Country*

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Abstract

Baldwin presents an interesting view of men and women and their relationship to masculine and feminine behavior. The concept of masculine identity remains problematic in *Another Country*, though the novel does offer some reflections on the struggle to develop a new vision for men. In *Another Country*, Baldwin presents various interpersonal relationships which illustrate the effects of oppressions resulting from ethnic, gender and sexual differences. The cause of this oppression as portrayed in the novel is an apparent lack of love and understanding. Baldwin's solution to the oppressive nature of these human relationships seems to be an affirmation of an idealized love; however, this type of love is only achieved through homosexual relations.

Keywords: Gender, *Another Country*, James Baldwin, homosexuality, masculinity, femininity.

The characters in *Another Country* match with prescribed gender roles although traditional representations of masculinity and femininity conflict with Baldwin's message of love and understanding. It is worth mentioning that Baldwin's depiction of femininity is negative one. Because Baldwin has presented masculinity as a more advantageous feature, the male characters don't give up their privilege as men and carefully protect their masculinity against any accusation of inadequacy (Gignac 89). However, the portrayal of gender becomes more complex as Baldwin imbues some of his male characters with the apparently feminine attributes of love and understanding, while persistently reinforcing their masculinity. The women who possess masculine features earn only contempt for their demeanor and eventually conform to societal norms.

The effect of the oppressive forces of masculine dominance which mould the identities of female characters parallels the effect of oppression on gay men. The female characters in the novel closet their personal identities and assume their expected gender roles. The maintenance of loving relationships between the men and women in the novel governs the actions of these women. In contrast to this subjugated role, the female characters are stereotyped as "castrators" –able to steal away male power. Like the men in *Another Country*, the women express their masculinity through their sexuality. Therefore, Baldwin reduces the role of women to love-struck victim or cunning seductress. Occasionally, Baldwin tempers this fatalistic image of women with a more affirmative depiction as insightful and loving beings. The dominance of masculine power renders the female characters and some of the gay men in the novel powerless victims of love and sexual desire.

According to Gignac, Baldwin does not differentiate between femininity and female identity, even though his women may display masculine traits (91). Christol observes that Baldwin distinguishes between sex and gender with regard to men, but not women:

Baldwin's conception of male/female relations places women at their traditional place, at the bottom of the power structure, the victims not only of cultural, social, or racial conditions, but also of some kind of biological destiny. In most of his theoretical developments on women, Baldwin seems to make no difference between sex and gender, a distinction that he is perfectly able to make when dealing with manhood and masculinity. (Christol 80-81)

The consequence of Baldwin's lack of distinction between femininity and womanhood in the female characters in the novel parallels the effects of denying gay identity the element of manhood. Some of Baldwin's women overstate their own femininity, while others use their sexuality to defend their identity. Leona, Ida, and Cass sublimate their identities to support their men. If their men deviate from their masculine role, their women will avenge themselves through sexual infidelity.

Though the female characters seem to express themselves as individuals in the novel, their personal identities remain closeted. Their relationships with men define their sense of identity and their self-assertion appears to be denied to them. First of all, Leona who is a pathetic victim of her feminine circumstance, eventually, surrenders to hysteria after being subjected to physical, psychological, and emotional cruelty. Rufus, her boyfriend, frequently humiliates her by calling her a whore in an attempt to control her sexuality. He always suspects that she might be attracted to other men, and he is intensely jealous of her. Leona strongly denies this accusation, but Rufus cannot believe her. In order to prove her loyalty, she becomes so emotionally reliant on Rufus that she cannot escape from him until he has beaten her brutally that she is forced to obtain refuge in an asylum. Leona is also tyrannized and victimized because she is compelled to return to the South, the place from which she had previously fled. She believes that she cannot survive without a man to love and her identity is therefore damaged.

On the other hand, Ida becomes the victim of her own revenge. She is compelled to closet her feminine identity due to the anger which results from the death of her brother, Rufus. She loves her brother deeply which also forces her to closet her feminine identity. This sisterly devotion compels her to use her sexuality in a masculine manner to avenge her brother's death and her black race also. Ida attains a sense of selfhood when she comes to know that her quest for revenge is futile. Ida adopts a masculine demeanor which is only a guise she couldn't maintain without consuming herself. Although Ida reveals her infidelity to Vivaldo, she doesn't realize that her struggle was not just black against white, but male against female.

Additionally, Cass is dependent on her husband's achievements for self-worth. She expects him to understand her idealized standards and lead a more Bohemian existence. Cass's attempts to impose her idealism upon her husband jeopardize her happiness and success in a male-dominated society. Richard's commercially successful novel appears to have been written for a popular rather than a learned audience, consequently Cass can no longer hold either herself or him in esteem. Therefore, she forms an affair with Eric to achieve her self-dignity. Cass who is a devoted mother takes risk to lose her children throughout this act, which proves her impulse towards securing an identity through a relationship with a man. Cass remains a victim of her masculinity in spite of the advantage of her social status and skin color.

Baldwin ultimately sacrifices Leona's, Ida's and Cass's individual identities because they conform to the feminine role. So when these women try to diverge from their expected roles (Leona's apparent sexual instability, Ida's infidelity and Cass's wealth), they are punished for their transgression. They cannot escape from the jail of their feminine destinies. The women whose identities are not totally destroyed eventually relinquish their attempted intrusion into masculine territory and remain faithful to their men.

In *Another Country*, Baldwin creates a strongly male-centered view of women because his female characters fluctuate between the stereotypical categories of whore and goddess. Though Baldwin detests labels, he looks unable to avoid this mythology of women. Baldwin's female characters play double roles in the novel: as a partner, a sister or a mother and as an emasculator. They symbolize the horrific spot which men feel they are trapped in and where they feel their manhood is demolished. Men are powerless over women's sexuality. The violence and hatred directed toward women in the novel equals any advantage of the sexual power granted to women. Baldwin's portrayal of women supports traditional gender stereotypes.

According to Baldwin's assessment, if a woman strays from a relationship, her male partner's honor is jeopardized as he cannot satisfy her. Women in the novel display a cunning and devious attributes, and they are always aspiring to cheat men of their masculinity. Ida's infidelity emasculates her lover Vivaldo. Ida, being black fulfills her role as whore because she has been Ellis's mistress and also has had sex with other white men. She is portrayed as a bitch ready to consume any white man to whom she has access. Vivaldo's manly pride is wounded and he feels doubly betrayed by her infidelity as he has deceived himself into thinking that he could sexually fulfill a black woman. Ida has destroyed his idealized vision of the faithful wife and she perpetuates the stereotype of the immoral black woman. Baldwin stresses that Ida's womanly contempt provokes her infidelity and once this motivation shrinks her power fades into uncertainty.

Cass the sacred, white woman commits adultery. It is Richard, the straight white American, who ironically emerges as a defenseless coward against women's castrating power. Richard's violent response to Cass's confession of her infidelity exemplifies this typically male reaction. As Vivaldo points out "Richard has been wounded, man, in his self-esteem" (329), and Cass's choice of Eric as a sexual partner only increases Richard's rage. Richard, in order to alleviate his loss of masculine pride, suspects that Eric must know of special sexual tricks. Cass later admits that Richard would never divorce her since he would have to confess that he could not fulfill his wife's desire as satisfactorily as a homosexual. In the novel, Baldwin tries to emphasize that all women are capable of infidelity, especially if they don't feel loved.

The hatred of women motivated by their role as castrating whore emerges ubiquitously throughout the novel. Yves's contempt for women is demonstrated through his adversarial relationship with his mother. He assumes the stereotypical perspective that women are sexual rivals for homosexuals. Yves believes that his mother uses her sexual charm as a survival mechanism during the war, as he explains that to Eric: "later, she says that she do it for me, that we would not have eaten otherwise. But I do not believe that. I think she liked that. I think she was always a whore" (160). Yves's hatred of all women seems rooted in an utter disdain for femininity.

Violence and hatred continue to be the typical defense against women's transgressions when they attempt to surpass on male power, as demonstrated by Rufus and Richard. Eric on the other hand is experiencing the same dilemma of emasculation with men, as he cannot tolerate the thought of another man dominating him and therefore threatening and diminishing his manhood.

Throughout the novel feminine love appears tainted with deception and betrayal. Baldwin predictably represents symbols of feminine love with jewellery. The earrings which Ida was wearing the night she met Eric were given to her by Rufus. They in turn were fashioned from the cufflinks that Rufus received as a gift from

Eric and suggest the significance of Rufus's and Eric's relationship. Ida's ruby serpent ring, the other piece of jewelry she wears, represents her position as simultaneously goddess and whore. She therefore is referred to as an African goddess when she receives the ring. When Rufus thinks about all the whores on Seventh Avenue, Ida "twists the ruby-eyed snake ring which he had brought her from another voyage" (12). The ring also proclaims her striking beauty and her sexual revenge against Vivaldo, because she can only remove the ring from her finger when she confesses her adultery to him.

Baldwin's insistence on the differences between women and men places his female characters at the questioning mercy of gender stereotypes. The value of femininity lies in the characteristics of love and understanding as mother, sister, and lover. In summary, the female characters closet their power as women, act out of feminine stereotypes and affirm themselves through their devotion to men and children. However, the irony is that this dedication does not allow the women to realize their full potentials, and consequently they continue to be controlled by men. This power over men lies in their sexuality; a sexuality which can steal a man's masculinity. Baldwin outlines the relationship between sexuality and race, but does not investigate the oppression which results from the relationship between sexuality and gender.

Biography

Dr. Rashed Daghamin, born at Hebron – Palestine in 1987, holds a D.Phil degree in American Literature from the University of Allahabad, (Allahabad, India, 2015), and an MA degree in English Literature from Andhra University, (Visakhapatnam, India, 2012). Daghamin at present serves as an Assistant Professor of English, University of Hail, Saudi Arabia not to mention that he formerly had served the same post at both Hebron University and Al-Quds University, Palestine.

Certificate of Publication

This is to certify that this article "The Politics of Gender in James Baldwin's Another Country" by Dr. Rashed Ahmad Daghamin has not been submitted to any local or international journal in this regard.

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