

THE SEARCH FOR BLACK IDENTITY AND RACIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE NOVELS OF JAMES BALDWIN AND RICHARD WRIGHT

'Identity' and 'identity crisis' have in popular usage become terms which alternately circumscribe something so large and so seemingly self-evident that a definition has become impossible. The term 'identity crisis' was first used in the Mt. Zion Veterans' Rehabilitation Clinic during the Second World War to refer to patients who had neither been "shell shocked" nor become malingerers, but had through the exigencies lost a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity. Identity is defined by psychologists as a subjective sense of sameness and continuity. William James describes it as a man's character which is "discernible in the mental or moral attitude in which... he felt himself most deeply and intensely active and alive" (Henry James, *The Letters of William James*).

Identity is the central element in interpersonal competence and development of a personality. It defines the role of an individual in a society. A person in his search for identity and self-realization goes through a series of existential encounters with society and in the end achieves insightful wisdom and learns about the world and its evils. A man's life is a never-ending search for identity and self-realization.

American society has been characterised, by what one calls 'pluralisation within a consensus', and what another refers to as 'pluralistic integration'. It proposes social identities aimed at a stable polity, viable economy, and proper need for personal freedom combined with social responsibility. But the realities of disorder, and anxieties about potential disorder, have persisted in the communities. Indeed, those twin concerns have contributed to the associate impulse in American life- an impulse which has brought some people together in an effort to restrain or exclude others. Whites managed to reduce the extraordinary diversity of American tribal cultures to a mental image of simply, the Indian, the Negro etc. As a result the blacks in America were on the verge of losing their identity through white American misunderstanding. But these attitudes are changing subtly with the passage of time, in ways that are instructive for an understanding of the warp and woof of communal experience.

The changing phases of American society have created severe identity crisis in the blacks. Still black Americans live with the memory of slavery and struggle to strike a balance between being a black on the one hand and an American on the other. They strive for emancipation from a more dominant group identity which is all pervasive, but hard to grasp identity which is located in the core of the individual and also in the core of his communal culture.

Anonymous folk creations of music tales and dances excluded, the contributions of the blacks are found to be small as only three generations separate the Negro from the muteness of slavery. When the black mouth

became vocal, the old world he used to know had been turned upside down and the new world naturally engaged his wonder and attention. He rejoiced with the realization of old dreams. It was the age of cries. It seemed monotonous but the ex-slave had the pitying ear of the world.

Then there came a host of black American writers with Richard Wright and James Baldwin in prominent places, who used art as a weapon to demonstrate the dark realities and struggles of the black American, to achieve identity and self-realization. They have focused on the tension between black self-image (achieved self) and white stereotype (ascribed self) and expose the imbalance between white and black cultures.

The Thesis entitled *The Search for Black Identity and Racial Consciousness in the Novels of James Baldwin and Richard Wright* outlines the different aspects of black identity as depicted in the novels of these writers, in the light of Erik H. Erikson's psychosocial theory of identity formation. Erikson, described as probably the most significant post-Freudian thinker in the field of psychoanalysis, places great emphasis on the development of a healthy identity. He conceives of identity as psychosocial and defines it as a process located in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture. It tends to cover four primary aspects of personality- a conscious sense of individual identity, an unconscious striving for continuity of personal character, the silent doings of ego synthesis, and an inner solidarity with a group's ideals and identity. The thesis analyses the role and identity of the black in American society by an examination of a few characters in the novels of

Richard Wright and James Baldwin. It also focuses on the social conditions of America which have determined the black's identity. The key component of the study lies in analysing the different ways in which identity is achieved by the two novelists.

Richard Wright, one of the most widely discussed writers in the Third World, in his novels presents the social conditions of black people, especially their racial status, poverty, disorganised families, fault education and their mental struggle to attain freedom and identity. The importance of his works comes not from his technique and style, but from the impact his ideas and attitudes have had on American lives. He demonstrated for the first time that a black American writer could indeed be a major writer of international fame and stature. His reputation was marked by an ability to respond to the currents of the social and intellectual history of his time. His most significant contribution, however, was his desire to portray accurately blacks to white readers, thereby destroying the white myth of the patient, humorous, subservient 'black man'. He showed American racism in raw and ugly terms which most black people of his own time could not escape and he himself experienced. James Baldwin used novels and essays to focus on the questions of racial and sexual identity and the political and social worlds that shaped the black American. He was intent upon pricking the consciousness of Americans in the twentieth century. He was an interpreter of the black psyche. Like Wright, he was an anatomist of black rage- the toxic effects of racism- and the 'double consciousness through which blacks adapted to it. He found in himself and in virtually every black person he knew,

a lacerating, soul-destroying anger which could destroy his identity as a black American. His vision of otherness and community is closely related to and depend upon his vision of self. Frequently the characters of his novels are unable to confront the darker sides of their human nature and hence personal and collective failures result. His characters are highly self-conscious, reflecting not only upon their social situation but also on the nature of their consciousness itself. Baldwin emphasizes the essential need of the individual to develop sexual and psychological consciousness and identity through a confrontation with the reality of one's self and past with the weapon of committed love.

The first chapter, "Identifying Identity: The Subjective Sense of Sameness and Continuity" presents Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory of identity formation. The chapter opens with an explanation on the concept of identity. Erikson's interest in the struggles of youth in the formation of an integrated identity is brought out. The chapter studies the process of identity formation in critical moments, and under conditions of break-down. Identity formation is always an unconscious, changing and developing process, a process of increasing differentiation. It is an on-going evolving process and is the subjective sense of one's own situation resulting from various social experiences. Erikson's concept of Life Cycle, which divides human development into eight stages, is explained in detail to explicate the inner process of identity formation. This chapter gives special emphasis on the fifth stage of identity formation, *Identity vs. Role Confusion* and explains the concept of *Psychosocial Moratorium* and *Negative Identity*. This chapter

highlights the psychosocial process of identity formation in a particular social and historical context, which is relevant for the study of identity crisis of the black Americans.

The second chapter, “Still Segregated: The Psychosocial Identity of the Black American”, explains how the social and cultural milieu of America has destroyed the identity of black Americans. It states what it means to be a black American and the role of race in determining the fate of blacks. This chapter throws light on the double consciousness of black Americans resulting from racism. Racism is an ideology of intellectual or moral superiority based upon the biological characteristics of a race. The study focuses on how American society maintains the separation of whites and blacks through stereotypes, racial prejudice, discrimination and separation. It proves that racism has become a permanent staple of the American psyche which is difficult to eradicate. Baldwin and Wright explore the disastrous effects of racism on the black American and formulate the black American identity as a hateful outcome of psychosocial process.

The third chapter, “Native Son as an Outsider: Fear, Hunger and Destitution in Richard Wright”, deals with the novels of Richard Wright and analyses his protagonists’ search for identity and self-realization. This chapter studies Wright’s three important novels; *Native Son*, *The Outsider* and *The Long Dream*. It focuses on his early experiences as a black child in Mississippi and the meaning of blacks’ life in America. Wright explores the possibilities of the black man as a subject for American fiction and thereby relates himself to

the American literary tradition. He writes from his own experiences of fear and abiding sense of alienation from whites, and from society in general. He portrays black man as an innocent hero victimized by a guilty society. His novels explore black man's search for identity in a world dominated by white morals and rules. His protagonists try to discover their own values, build their ethics in a world that denies them access to "white" morality. They are the embodiment of violence and crime by revolting against dominant white society. His heroes' loss of identity results from a particular social context and they stand as victims of social milieu. They are like caged animals who have never known freedom. Their search for identity and freedom end up in a social pocket from which there is no return. Wright's heroes lack a sense of positive identity. They are always an embodiment of fear and anxiety which eventually leads them to wrong paths. For their fulfilment they go beyond prohibitions, natural instincts, and morality and create a system of values for themselves.

The fourth chapter, "Country Beyond the Mountains: Racial Identities of Sexuality James Baldwin", focuses the search for identity found in the novels of James Baldwin. This study looks into four novels written by Baldwin: *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *Giovanni's Room*, *Another Country* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Baldwin's novels and essays have had a stunning impact on American life and have opened up new ways to understand contemporary societal problems. There is no other writer in America who expresses with such poignancy and abrasiveness the dark realities of racial ferment in America. He presents the fierce and polemical black American life and exposes the

innumerable overtones and undertones of interracial relations. His fictional works show an increasing and painful awareness of the problems inherent in the quest for personal and artistic identity. The crises in Baldwin's life, most often communicated through his works, have given rise to a single minded dedication in search of discovery of the self. He demonstrates the burden of being black and bisexual in an American cultural environment. His novels evoke the reader to the distinctiveness of black life in America. His novels portray the world of the black American in its diversity and richness, not as a mere spectre of protest. His vision has been substantially shaped by his private anguish as a mistreated stepson, black and homosexual and is a product of his own struggle to define the chaos of his experience to achieve an orderly sense of self. In the depths of despair, he has forged his own identity, and through his novels he has helped blacks to shape their own. Baldwin's novels portray the black American in search of the eternal, elusive identity. The theme of identity is the most pervasive one in his works and involves the major issues of race, nationality, sexuality, art and morality.

The fifth chapter, "Negotiating the Difference: Negative Identity of Richard Wright and Inclusive Identity of James Baldwin", compares and contrasts the two novelists and supplements the studies of early chapters. Their works are complementary because they are intimately linked with their involvement in race relations. Both have undergone painful and disturbing childhoods and therefore have developed 'surrendered identity' which means the invisibility namelessness and facelessness, all the black in America face.

The fictional world of the two writers posits an engaging picture of the black torn between two worlds- the self and society. The fettered self, struggling for emancipation from the stranglehold of a dominant white society, appears to be the most conspicuous trait of their novels.