
Black Art and Artist: A Study of James Baldwin and Toni Morrison**¹Vinay Kumar**¹Research Scholar, Punjabi University, Patiala

ABSTRACT

The research paper aims to deal with Black art and how the Black writers and artists have used it as a medium to shun the oppression and the atrocities faced by them in general and more particularly with the ideas, confrontations and experiences witnessed by James Baldwin and Toni Morrison. The objective of the paper is to examine art as a form of literature and not mere propaganda or an aesthetic practice, rather a voice that has been used by American Blacks for self-expression. Besides, art serves as a cultural medium that carries the shared experiences of a society. Black art as a form of literature has served as a powerful medium throughout history to express inequalities faced by Blacks in different parts of the globe. Moreover, Black art could be treated as a protest that has been used to understand the identity, resilience and resistance of Blacks in America. In the paper an attempt has been made to study Black art and the experiences of James Baldwin and Toni Morrison in the light of the texts titled *The Mouth Full of Blood*, *The Fire Next Time*, “James Baldwin’s Eulogy” and “The Habit of Art”. The paper begins with a brief introduction to Baldwin and Morrison and how both the writers were influenced by the literary careers of each other. Besides, the paper will also investigate how art and its various forms have played a significant role in expressing anger, pain, protest and resilience.

Keywords: *Art, Artist, Propaganda, Black, Atrocities, Oppression, Voice, Resistance, History, Inequality.*

James Arthur Baldwin and Toni Morrison are the representative writers of the African American literature along with the writers like Du Bois, Washington, Walker, Angelou, Adichie and Coates. Baldwin a prominent Black novelist, essayist, civil rights activist and filmmaker of the second half of the twentieth century was born in Harlem in the year 1924. As a victim of racism he has attempted to dismantle various racial, cultural, social and sexual

myths prevailing in America. Morrison was born in the year 1924 and was the first Black African American noble laureate. It can be argued that both the writers were contemporaries. Morrison met Baldwin for the first time when she was working as an editor at Random House to sign him a copy of his work. As victims of race and racism both Baldwin and Morrison have attempted to raise their voices, making use of different forms of art such as music, visual arts, paintings, sculpture, literature, architecture, cinema and other creative practices for expression. Morrison along with other writers of African American descent such as Walker, Angelou and Coates, was hugely influenced by Baldwin. Morrison, while giving voice to the similar concern paid a heartfelt tribute to Baldwin and his literary legacy in her essay titled "James Baldwin's Eulogy" in the major collection *Mouth Full of Blood*.

Baldwin as a writer and an artist has been lauded by Morrison on three grounds; language, tenderness and courage. By remembering the astonishing gift of art, language, tenderness, courage and friendship Morrison says, "Jimmy, there is too much to think about you, and much to feel. You gave me a language to dwell in-a gift so perfect, it seems my own invention. The difficulty is your life refuses summation-it always did-and invites contemplation instead. Now I discover that, in your company, it is myself I know" (229). Referring to the language given to Blacks Morrison acknowledges Baldwin for his honesty in the use of language. Morrison writes you exposed the secrets of American language and reshaped it until it was truly modern, dialogic, representative and humane (Morrison). Morrison enunciates, "you stripped language out of ease and false comfort, fake innocence, evasion, hypocrisy and disingenuousness" (230). The mentioned aspects of language like evasion, hypocrisy, innocence, were replaced by clarity and a lean targeted power. (Morrison). According to Morrison the language in the hands of Baldwin was neither bloodless nor bloody, and yet alive. (Morrison). Morrison talks of the second gift given by Baldwin to Blacks: the courage. The courage in this sense means that he made Blacks learn how to speak. You entered as a stranger in a village and transformed the miles of distance between the people into an intimacy. Morrison enunciates, "it was you who gave us the courage to appropriate an alien, hostile, all-white geography because you had discovered this world is White no longer, and it will never be White again" (231).

Keeping in the view importance of art and its different forms it will be on place to highlight the relation of the Beauford Delany and Baldwin. Delany was a great modern American painter. Delany has been usually referred as 'spiritual father' of Baldwin and has a great

influence of Delany on his literary career. In a symposium titled “In a Speculative Light: The Arts of James Baldwin and Beauford Delany” reviewed by D. Quintin Miller Quintin dwells on the literary and biographical details of both Delany and Baldwin. Referring to a particular address in the symposium Miller refers to the keynote speaker named Leening and says:

I have attended somewhere in the neighborhood of fifty academic conferences since I entered this profession, and I can count on one hand the number of times a speaker has received a spontaneous standing ovation. Actually, I can count it on one finger. It happened on the second day of the Symposium on James Baldwin and his “spiritual father”—Beauford Delaney—at the University of Tennessee Knoxville’s Humanities Center. (Quintin)

The above mentioned statement and the experience shared by Leening describe the literary importance of Baldwin and the influence of Delany on the literary career of Baldwin.

Referring to the significance of art, artist and organizations, Morrison in her essay “The Habit of Art” in the major collection *Mouth Full of Blood* quotes her contemporary artists like Toby Lewis, Peter Lewis, Rashid Johnson, Jacob Lawrence and Hank Wills. Morrison emphasized the importance of art as a form of literature and writes that art has its roots in both history and philosophy. Praising the art and the role of artists Morrison says, “art is not mere entertainment or decoration, it has meaning, and the artists want and need to fathom that meaning- not fear, dismiss, or construct superficial responses told to them by authorities” (54). In the mentioned quotation Morrison dismisses the authority and put the art as a form of resistance, protest and a voice to every form of oppression. To prove the significance of the above given statement Morrison refers to an incident reported by a writer based in Haiti during dictatorship of Francois about the island killings and slaughter of dissenters and common masses and their honor and burial. Referring to the cruelty of the regime Morrison says, “if a brother or parent or a child, even neighbor ventured out to do so, to bury the dead, they were themselves shot and killed. The bodies lay where garbage fell until a government garbage truck arrived to dispose of the corpses with trash” (55). One could imagine the trauma, horror, devastation, and pain endured by a Black society in America. The whole scene has been adapted and played several times on different platforms. When the performances were observed by the people of regime they saw some harmless people being killed. The play staged was ancient Greek tragedy titled *Antigone* by Sophocles about the

moral and fatal consequences of dishonoring the unburied dead. At the end of the play the writer says, “make no mistakes: the art is fierce”(55).

Morrison shares another anecdote in the similar context when she encountered a Black women artist in a conference at Strasbourg. The center of the conversation between the two has been the atrocities suffered and experienced by Black women artists practicing the modern art in North America. Sharing a small piece of conversation about the art and the significance of artists Morrison says:

“we chatted amiably, when suddenly she leaned in closer and
whispered, you have to help us. You have to. I was taken aback.
help who, help what, I asked her, they are shooting us down in
the streets. Women who write. They are murdering us. Why?
women practicing modern art was a threat to the regime. (Morrison)

The ideas shared by Morrison and the Black woman artist highlight the importance of art and artist primarily. Secondly, there is a glimpse of the atrocities faced by Black women facing the danger. Furthermore, Morrison reflects on the necessity of organizations and how such gatherings become the voices of the oppressed and a revolt at the same time. Dwelling on her contemporary society Morrison says:

we live in the world where justice equals vengeance.
where private profit drives public policy, where the body
of civil liberties, won cell by cell, bone by bone, by the brave
and the dead, withers in the searing heat of all war all the time,
and where respect for and even passion in great art can dwindle,
can shrink to a price list” (56).

It the above mentioned paragraph Morrison reveals the secrets of the art and artists and its larger impact of the psychology of an individual. Moreover, it can be argued that art as form of literature has a great significance to transform and savage mind to a civilized and it has a larger impact on the society as art has been a healing for the oppressed. Morrison in the similar context in her essay titled “Arts Advocacy” refers to art as form of symbolic communication and language and lauds the role of artists and their habit of being resilient.

While emphasizing the ‘resilience’ as complex obstacle in the artists Morrison says, “artists have a very bad habit of being resilient, and it is that deceives us into believing that the best of it sort of gets done anyhow-and the ‘great’ of that ‘best’ sort of lasts anyhow” (64).

Further, elaborating on the significance of art and artist Morrison in the essay “The Habit of Art” refers to a painting gifted to her by one of her student. According to Morrison it was a collage of the different print. The inscription on the painting was, “no one told me it was like this. It’s only matter shot through with pure imagination. So rise up little souls- join the army toward the meaning of change. Fight...fight... wage the unwinnable” (57). Morrison’s status as Black writer chiefly rests in her bold voice, protest and resistance. Besides, the essays such as *The Source of Self-Regard* and *Mouth Full of Blood* are often anthologized and praised for the explicit reflection of the society and the wrong practices such as racism, exploitation, injustice and violence. The juxtaposing of different words as mentioned in above quotation like fight...fight, imagination, little souls, unwinnable reflects the invincible will, self-resilience and the spirit of the Blacks to fight oppression and raise their bold voice against the authority through different forms of the literature.

Though Baldwin was an ambitious novelist and playwright, but his essays have gained him an unmatched literary recognition in American literature. For instance, the most important aspect of Baldwin’s writings is that his literary works, especially essays and their content involve storytelling that is, highly personal and retrospective as well as social and collective public discourse. His works are highly influenced by his personal, political and social life as he has been a victim of race and racism in America. His essays are regarded as contemporary classics because of “their polished style and timeless insights” as noted by the researcher in his paper titled, “Renegotiation of Black Identity: A Study of James Baldwin’s Essays in Postmodern Context” (Kumar, 2026), Kumar further argues that “The essays of Baldwin are replete with the memory of experiences and contain inescapable memories of his childhood in America” (643). His essays while having “eloquence often contain digressions and subthemes and many a time show a disregard for the failure of coherence” (645). Baldwin has been counted among his contemporaries as one of the greatest essayist because of his deep and meaningful insights that has changed the perception of whites for blacks in American literature.

CONCLUSION

Black art as a form of literature is not merely as aesthetic practice, rather an engagement of various social factors such as justice, dignity, equality and discrimination. As mentioned in the given paper that how art as medium of expression has been adapted by Baldwin and Morrison to portray their experiences. Black writers and artists challenged the most dominant narratives in America and have given voice to their social experiences through various forms of art and artistic expressions like literature, jazz, hip-hop, blues, visual imageries, collages, drawings, sculptures and architecture. It will be very apt to mention Nuri et al. (528) in the paper titled artistic expressions as a vehicle of cultural memory: bridging identity, heritage and intercultural understanding. She says, “artistic expressions are explored as a form of symbolic communication or language encoding cultural values and historical narratives in visual and performative signs” (528)

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