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“Sonny’s Blues”: The Dream Variation and Cultural Integration through Music

Manahari Sharma

Lecturer of English

Trinity International College, Kathmandu

Email: ms.ksitiz@gmail.com

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Abstract

“Sonny’s Blues” is a chronicle of racial prejudice, diverse dreams, suffering, redemption, and reconciliation. As a tale of conflicting relationships between two brothers in Harlem society, it narrates the narrative of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness on two opposite sides that the brothers are situated in: the legacy of African-American cultural and mainstream dreams. It is against this background dichotomy that the suffering of Sonny, the African-American protagonist, engendered due to his latent desire to be a jazz musician, is shown. This paper discourses on the existential narrative and its manifestation on society through an individual and answers different questions: why would characters go through extreme familial tension? What aspires them to embody two dissimilar legacies? How does music amidst racism produce a therapeutic effect? How are human predicaments resolved and why do characters go back to their original niche, which their ancestors had created? Hence, this paper aims at how music outcasts the barriers and welcomes avenues of resilience by removing the thundering cloud of stillness and darkness in the blue sky of Harlem.

Keywords: *racial prejudice, dream variation, therapeutic music, resilience, reconciliation*

Introduction

James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues” is a tale of a conflicting relationship between two brothers, who are departed by their dream variation. In the story, two siblings are struggling for their existence: Sonny is deeply rooted in his culture, and his brother, a high school

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algebra teacher and narrator, adopts the mainstream American dream for survival. The familial tension that is depicted in “Sonny’s Blues” displays the root of long prejudices against Harlem culture in contrast to the power of mainstream American society. The narrator distances himself from the socio-cultural affiliation with Harlem society, but Sonny is attached to his roots and dreams of becoming a celebrated jazz musician through which native existence exists, he believes. Hence the great American dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are juxtaposed in two contrasting ways: while the narrator follows the mainstream dream for his safe and dignified future, Sonny seeks freedom and happiness through his culture, particularly jazz music. In this paper, I discourse the sociocultural differences between the brothers and their influence on shaping the identity and dream of American society. I further discuss the aesthetic power of music that ultimately strengthens cultural and familial values through resistance.

The social and cultural disparity created by the history of American society is an unavoidable truth of the post-war era. The economic crisis and the suffering of the people in the name of nationalities are reflected in “Sonny’s Blues”. Baldwin expresses the reality of racial discrimination as John M. Reily argues that the story ends the relationship of the brothers who have chosen different paths to deal with the threatening ghetto and finally this reconciliation comes through blues which ultimately becomes a “metaphor of Black community” (56). The powerful symbol “trembling cup” (Baldwin 25) is a biblical reference which symbolizes the scapegoat that many Blacks were during the period. Robertson observes Sonny as a true “scapegoat” (189). In the final, Sonny puts a cup on the piano, starts singing jazz and finally gets salvation from his long-tortured life. Further, music embodies the Harlem culture. Jacqueline C. Jones opines that it is in the African-American folk culture that Sonny gets his artistic inspiration and makes him “Baldwin’s ideal artist-hero” (446). Sonny’s deep infatuation and intoxicative affair with music prove him a hero of the artistic world. It is seen that Jazz carries the racial legacy of Harlem people that connects their souls with culture and existence in American society. Sonny’s dream to be a jazz musician somehow destroys his social life as he ends up behind bars, but the chasm created between the two brothers is abridged by the music itself. This is the inherent power of cultural music. The glorious past and the meaningful present of African people are connected through musical strength.

“Sonny’s Blue’s” is a fiction about not just anxiety, discomfort, and racial discrimination but also fear, darkness, resistance, passion, broken promises, and reconciliation. I will divide this paper into three different sections. The first discusses the dream juxtaposition between the two brothers. The second explores darkness and resistance as presented in the story, where it is argued that the sound of silence ultimately abridges the journey of reconciliation. And the last explains the cultural reintegration through music.

Dream Juxtaposition

Baldwin depicts the profound existential crisis in the characters, the narrator and Sonny, both searching for the self in a chaotic society. They have been marching the diverse road to find the unsated dreams. Sonny revolts and wrestles with his brother to find his existence. He does not compromise but is addicted to drugs and frantic boosters and keeps aspiring towards his dream. But the narrator struggles in limbo because of which as Donald Bieganowski asserts, he keeps confronting with his identity (71). Being a high school teacher, he adopts the mainstream American dream despite knowing his dreams do not come to terms with society. He struggles a lot within himself and smiles with ambivalence and exhaustion to hide his deep anguish. Baldwin symbolically knits the story by juxtaposing this instance with Sonny’s eternal quest for his being highlighting the hope within the vast ocean of hatred and sorrowful ground. The overwhelming imagery of Sonny within the disturbing socio-cultural environment carries a strong commitment and the legacy of Harlem culture.

The music is used as a trope of despair and suffering. It rescues the self from the question of prejudice and stereotypes as a tool by exploring the comfort zone. Sonny was brought up with an understanding of musical aestheticism despite going through hard times. He agreed to stay with Isabela, sister-in-law, as he would follow his passion. He could find himself alone and absorbed “at that piano playing for his life” (35). Hence, music has become an artistic weapon for resistance. The resistance through music has become his culture. At first, it sounds like a personal narrative, but it embodies the entire Black culture seen through the social definition of ‘culture’. This definition, Williams argues, subdues certain meanings in all aspects of daily life (48). In Sonny’s case, interestingly, it is the mainstream culture that gets dismantled and challenged. However, again, the challenge is highlighted because of the opposition placed between the narrator’s way of life and Sonny’s resistance to mainstream culture: while the former accepts the existing culture rooted in the American dream, the latter questions social and cultural domination. Hence Sonny, a rebel hero, struggles in complex areas from a different vantage. The picture of the two brothers juxtaposed is in alignment with what Stuart Halls theorises happens in the blend of the new and the old in a given culture: “Old lines of thoughts are disturbed, older constellation displaced, and elements of old and new are regrouped around the different set of premises and themes” (157).

The narrator, unlike Sonny, looks at the glorious history of African-American culture and existence with anger. The narrator distances himself from the legacy of his society and reluctantly embodies an imaginary world. His psychology functions negatively, so he treats the youngsters of his community as an evil force. He observes Harlem kids as “evil and disrespectful”, and they are “filled with rage” (Baldwin 17). He prefers disconnection from this community. Despite himself, he keeps complaining to his brother during a meeting with Sonny’s friends, “He’d never been mine, having been too young for me, and anyway, I’d

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never like him” (19). Such kind of comments raise questions like ‘Why is he biased towards his brother and Harlem tradition by substantiating the narrative of mainstream culture?’, ‘Is he doing everything for his survival and does he not support his culture because he will have an easy way of life in the disturbing community?’ An answer to these questions is the narrator’s predilection towards the mainstream society. For example, the narrator does not allow Sonny to be a jazz musician, despite Sonny’s adamancy, as this genre does not have its optimum legacy in the mainstream musical world. Through his association with Sonny, the narrator sees himself on the lower side of the dichotomy between high culture and low culture. Such binary opposites are created to perpetuate the power and superiority of mainstream society (Tyson 96). Needless to say, the narrator overlooks any possibility of existence through consensus and dialogue.

Baldwin displays social pathology in *Sonny’s Jazz*, expressing repulsive and transgressive voices. Eva Kowalska notices “Baldwin’s construction of a vantage point of critical empathy, which he models as a mode of engagement with the ‘troubled’...redemptive value of art about hardship” (1). Critical empathy means a way of expressing own suffering. Baldwin illustrates the empathy of people to identify the latent structure of Harlem culture. Characters adopt diverse praxis while creating history, either harsh revolt or soft aggression through writing. Sonny and his friends play music “blasting” in the background. It is not a mellifluous traditional piece of music but “something black and bouncy” (Baldwin 20). The repressive anger is expressed through the blasting sounds of music. In addition, the music, as Tracey Sherard argues, is an advocacy of African Americans’ self-awareness of their cultural practices and the hybridity stemming from their appropriation (693). The blues reveal the darker side of society: the suffering and discrimination resulting from the feelings of alienation in their place. Thus, it is not wrong when Michael Clark claims “*Sonny’s Blues*” to be a scrutiny of why black heritage is important and particularly why music is crucial in that heritage (197). This acuity of culture is preserved by Sonny through music.

Sonny does not let down his dream despite his brother’s unaccommodating behaviours. The grave infatuation with his musical journey does not stop even after he is sentenced to jail. The story references the death of Sonny’s father “during a drunken weekend in the middle of the war” (26). However, the state-sponsored war could not suppress the voice of civilians. For example, the jailor responds, “They’ll let him out, and then it’ll just start all over again” (20). Sonny, understanding such oppressive action, embodies the opposite reaction. Music acts as Sonny’s soft resistance through its persistent and perseverant moves. The family’s torture, the state’s imprisonment, and socio-cultural upheavals do not discourage Sonny’s journey to pick up the dream of his life. The narrator accepts Sonny as a rebel hero: “Freedom lurked around us, and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen (47). This inference embodies the narrator’s acceptance of the African-American identity, which is possible through Sonny’s dream.

The Darkness and Resistance

The story begins with a powerful image of the narrator reading the newspaper about Sonny imprisoned for drug peddling. Being unable to accept the truth, he finds nothing in his favour except a gloomy future as he is trapped by the darkness, anxiety and discomfort roaring outside; the darkness that operates to evoke pain (Burke, 132). Baldwin writes about the parallel between darkness and the brothers’ relationship as “an icy cold feeling in his belly” that forced him to almost “choke or scream” and compelled him to remember his brother and the special moments between them (17). He tries to resist his emotions to accept the truth instead of going away. The so-called fear of losing someone forever: the ‘anxiety’ in Freudian terms, has been triggered by the newspaper.

Darkness roams in each aspect of life but one needs clear vision and mind to understand the very nature of it. Burke argues that “darkness is observable that still as we recede from the light” (123). The narrator has never imagined that Sonny could go so down and all the light on his face would vanish. That faded face forecasts the gloomy future of Sonny, which the narrator can see in the newspaper image. The narrator acknowledges the happiness in his students, just like he used to see in his brother’s face. However, his joy is ruined by the realization of those children’s destinies. The darkness of the present and future is reflected by the fact that he and his brother, like the students, used to be unaware of their future. Their mother, like many others, also witnessed the ruined history of the beautiful life and family, suffering from the darkness without justice as the destiny of Black people in Harlem.

The sound of silence itself has proved a powerful weapon of resistance. Sonny either complains or argues for his demand but does the things of his choice with passive resistance expressed through the music. People never try to understand the storm within him and his passion for music; he could not see any gateway to exit from the intoxicating world of narcotic addiction, but this confines him in a jail cell. The silent storm outbursts when Sonny receives a letter from his brother after a long time, but his reply to this letter devastates the narrator. The narrator recalls his promise to his mother to take care of Sonny on her deathbed and realizes his guilt for not having a connection with Sonny and not fulfilling the responsibility of being the elder brother. The storm within him becomes more empathetic towards Sonny and says, “Now I feel like a man who’s been trying to climb up out of some deep, real deep and funky hole and just saw the sun up there, outside” (22). This sign of reconciliation (through empathy) fixes the broken channel with new resilience: new hope between two broken hearts and the journey towards hope from despair. Unfortunately, the bond of brotherhood gets temporarily broken since Sonny is determined to absorb himself in Jazz despite the narrator’s execration. In particular, Sonny’s admiration for Bird is itself a resistance against the contemporary trend of Jazz. Bird’s music is new, so the admiration is another rebelling act as Sonny believes, “People ought to do what they want to do, what else they are alive for” (32).

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Sonny desires to exist in Harlem to indulge in the piano, a medium of expressing his feelings, rage, and sorrow. As the narrator senses, despite their wish, Isabel and her family “certainly couldn’t throw him out. Neither did they dare to make a great scene about that piano because even they dimly sensed, as I sensed, from so many thousands of miles away that Sonny was at that piano playing for his life” (35). Sonny has grown so much of musical hunger inside him that he would stay with musicians in a white girl’s apartment in Greenwich. But when Isabel’s mother knows about the practice and screams at Sonny, he reacts in silence, louder than any music ever played. Thus, for Sonny, the screaming and people associated with that (his brother, Isabel and her mother) were in stark contrast to his dream and “he could hardly help feeling that they had stripped him naked and were spitting on that nakedness” (35). This fear of being touched by others in his deepest corner “confronts” with an “enigma” losing sight entirely of the connection between fear and danger (Freud, 349) and resulting in a dearth of a proper vision. So, that scream ironically makes Sonny break all relations that hold him back from his musical journey. He releases himself with the motive to carry the revolutionary legacy of Harlem. But such letting go of the relationships could be menacing to life, as Reid argues that the threats to life can reside both inside or outside the character’s minds; particularly, the “demons of the American myth become the demons in the souls of the recipients of evil who dwell in the darkness of Harlem” (446). The American myth of demons is represented by other characters than Sonny but Sonny is also a recipient of evil. This is because he gets inspired by blues, a subgenre within jazz (that originated in Harlem) which is against classical jazz and not accepted by the jazz musicians in the town. So, the darkness of Harlem mentioned by Reid is embodied in jazz which takes over Sonny entirely. As discussed earlier, this darkness and the letting go is also one of the reasons why his blues first makes Sonny suffer (because he has to separate from his family) but it is also what paradoxically empowers him to resist the darkness.

Revival of Culture through Music

“Sonny’s Blues” stands as an avenue of reintegration and continuation of the legacy of Harlem culture. Though the narrator does not declare disassociation from the mainstream American dream, he embodies and associates with his ground. He realizes the value of Harlem culture, respects fraternity, and acknowledges the sufferings of African-American people: this is reinforced by how despite his belief that nothing is going to change, he keenly observes people singing songs like “It has rescued many a thousand!” and “Tis the old ship of Zion,” for a long time. Though he does not assert, that these songs reflect the songs of hope. This “music seemed to soothe a poison out of them; and time seemed, nearly, to fall away from the sullen, belligerent, battered faces, as though they were fleeing back to their first condition while dreaming of their last” (40). The narrator, Sonny and many others in Harlem share the common ground of origin. This time, Sonny outpours his emotions and

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says, “I was most *out* of the world, I felt that I was in it, that I was *with* it, really, and I could play or, I didn’t have to *play*, it just came out of me, it was there . . . I needed a fix, I needed to find a place to lean, I needed to clear a space to listen” (43; my emphasis). The repressive feelings and suffocative experiences have transformed into a spontaneous outflow through his music. This sort of continuous resistance, nonetheless, reconnects the family, society, culture and all his broken relations.

Sonny invites his brother to listen to his music in a nearby club where he performs at night. It is not just an invitation to a music show but an invitation to enter into the music and understand Sonny’s life. The subway to reach the club resembles the child birthing passageway: “dark street, downtown . . . through the narrow [way towards] the entrance of the big room” (44), where “lights were very dim” (44), and they, just like a newborn, couldn’t see much out of it. Two brothers experience their door to the new world, where they find themselves accepting each other’s flaws and strengths with a strong, rejuvenated bond. This is like a kingdom of Sonny’s musical world (and Sonny was born as a king), and there is “not even a question that his veins bore royal blood” as he heritages it from his father (45). The narrator places himself in the “table in a dark corner,” (45) as he is ready to listen to Sonny’s darkness. He sounds well aware of how music is composed by the one who is “dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it. It is Sonny’s triumph. The narrator realizes “his triumph . . . is ours” (46). Music, here, thus, as an art, connects the broken heart and serves a better cause: for the welfare of individuals and mankind as a whole, art serves as a tool for tying people together through shared emotions. The bonding between Sonny and his instrument, the piano, is pleasing. This bonding is close enough to what W.B. Yeats expresses in these poetic lines: “O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, how can we know the dancer from the dance?” (Lines 63-64). Hence, blues makes the narrator admit his mistakes, and steep in Sonny’s dream, a dream of African Americans in Harlem.

Conclusion

“Sonny’s Blues” celebrates the saga of dream juxtaposition and the revival of the culture of Harlem through the musical revolution. The long and unspeakable silence of Sonny ultimately becomes loud and clear. Jazz is played as an epitome of Harlem culture, identity and resistance against the mainstream white American society. To him, music is tantamount to life. The metaphor of the trembling cup during a musical performance at night illustrates that Sonny, as a musician, is getting to the point of salvation. Despite having mainstream power dynamics, which is embodied by his brother, Sonny fights through music. Further, blues stands as a metaphor for having a unique quality that consists of a combination of personal and social significance. Having said that, Baldwin’s aesthetic representation of music deals with a package of dreams, culture, racism, resistance, redemption, and resilience.

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