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Structural Reflection: Race and Class in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues"

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Abstract

This research paper explores that the African American repression against the Afro-American community in American society takes place primarily due to two factors: race and class. Behind the story of the dejected position of the Black community, there is not only a single reason but rather multiple factors that are intertwined. Basically, Baldwin's story "Sonny's Blues" represents that race and class seem to be contributing aspects to their disregarded presence in society. In addition, most people believe that Afro-Americans are treated as others simply due to racism in the white-dominated American society. However, using two theories: Marxist classism and African American theories, analyzing the story Sonny's Blues, this paper aims to show how both class and race simultaneously become the basic foundation of oppression against the Afro-American community. Actually, for how long and how deeply Afro-Americans have been subjugated in American society as a consequence of their race and economic class. It means the story reveals both economic class and race would be responsible for their wretched status in the White Mainstream American society.

Key Words: Afro-American, Racism, Socio-economic class, Harlem Renaissance, Domination, Suffering, Cultural Heritage.

Introduction:

In every society, the hierarchal status of human beings has been a very old phenomenon in the world. In a society, people are divided into different intersectionality such as class, race gender, and so on. In other words, different sociocultural components are interconnected to keep on the pervasive social injustice, inequality, and partiality. American society has been fragmented into different sections for centuries due to sociocultural practices as well as prejudiced policy against the marginalized community- Afro-American. Historically, the Black community has been excluded from mainstream society in the name of race and economic class. Actually, Afro-American people

are oppressed because of the colour of their skin and their destitute economic status in society. Similarly, they have been excluded from justice, equal rights, freedom, and even fundamental human rights in comparison to white people. The widely accepted truth is that education is the foundation of the overall development of human beings and creates equality in society. However, Critic Washington discloses the bitter discriminatory policy of the education system of American society of the past against the black community. “The most perplexing question was where to find a teacher. The young man from Ohio who had learned to read the paper was considered, but his age was against him” (Washington 591). This expression clearly shows what has been the situation of American society regarding the social inequalities between two different races-the Black and the White.

In Baldwin’s story “Sonny’s Blues,” there is the deeply rooted prevalent racial issue of American society between White and Black communities that leads to the economic disparity between Them-Black and White. The story depicts that Afro-Americans have been suppressed obviously being black but at the same time, their existing socio-economic class is also equally responsible. Hence, they would deserve a segregated identity due to their race and economic class. Furthermore, when we talk about Afro-Americans and racial issues in American society the Harlem Renaissance movement cannot be ignored. It was the fundamental movement of Black community for the equality, justice, freedom and emancipation eliminating the prevalent racism for the prosperity of the entire nation. “Harlem is always at the center. Harlem became almost exclusively black and developed into the vital center of African-American culture in America” (Abrams 221). Historically through crucial cultural-literary movements such as the civil rights movement, Harlem Renaissance distinguished writers and freedom fighters like Langston Hughes, W. E. B. DuBois, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, etc. had raised the voices against the stereotyped racial-classist hierarchy and disparity of the society. For Hicks, Harlem is the sensitive location for the black. “Harlem is the country’s largest black community. It was home to many blacks who had come to North to escape the sever repression of Jim Crow laws in South. Baldwin himself said Harlem was a “dreadful place...a kind of concentrate camp” (Hicks 9). In the story “Sonny’s Blues,” the operation of racism appears as the main source of classism that reflects the socio-economic inequalities and injustice of the American Society. Basically, African American theory believes that “racism is the economic, political social-political or psychological oppression of individuals or groups based on race” (Tyson 210). So, there is the racist stereotyped myth that people of color are less civilized, less intelligent, less moral than white. In the story, although the narrator is an educated person who is not less than any white professional, he has to suffer due to his inherited family background-race and class.

Literature Review

The story “Sonny’s Blues” is a true reflection of the status of Afro-American people in an American white-dominated society. Actually, the characterization of different characters displays the fragmented self because they do not have solidarity among themselves. Rather they are entangled between their own Afro-American heritage and the white-dominated borrowed mainstream culture. So, they belong nowhere having a split identity. A scholar Pratt views Sonny’s elder brother deserves comfortable life being an educated professional but in the real ground, he belongs neither in his own community nor in the White community:

Sonny’s brother, who is comfortably surrounded by the middle-class success. He has escaped the vivid killing street of Harlem, obtained a college education and a high school teaching job and he has become firmly entrenched in middle-class traditions yet there is a scene of uneasiness as he stares at the newspaper announcing Sonny’s arrest and observe. (Pratt 31)

It is apparent that Sonny's brother cannot escape from his real suffering as a black and as the son of poor parents. Rather he must be disturbed frequently in his everyday life. According to, Marxist theory classism is the suppressive belief system that creates the social hierarchy on the basis of economic class. It believes that the higher social class people are inborn superior but lower-class people deserve the dependable status. "In traditional classist societies, social class is determined by birth and cannot be changed accumulation or loss of wealth because class superiority or inferiority is believed to be in the blood" (112). Here, the unnamed Sonny's brother is unable to uplift his position detaching for his inborn class because the class is determined by our birth, not by our deeds. In fact, classism is oppressive that divides not only in society but even inside the family. Critic Reilly, in his article points out the fragmented relations among the family members as victims of the practices of classism. At this point, the narrator sympathizes feelings and perception into a conception of the Blues. "He realizes *Sonny's Blues* can help everyone who listens be free, in his own case free of the conventions that had alienated him from Sonny and that dimension of Black culture represented in Sonny's style of living" (Reilly 59). In fact, the narrator does not feel to belong in his own family and community because he believes in the white middle-class philosophy of life.

Similarly, another critic Byerman also has shown the severe impact of classist attitude in the emotional bonding of family members, especially between brothers. "It tells of the developing relationship between Sonny a musician and drug addict and the narrator his brother who feels a conflict between the security of his middle-class life and the emotional risks of brotherhood with Sonny"(Byerman 72). They are emotionally detached more because they belong to different classes. In addition, Albert argues that how far sense of class hierarchy is destructive within the black community. "The narrator's major source of discontent has been his selfish desire to assimilate and lead a "respectable," safe life as a high-school algebra teacher" (Albert 179). For him, the classist attitude causes the separation in the family in the story "Sonny's Blues." Another scholar Goldman views that how racism and economic clout are intertwined persistently brings cruelty and brutality in human society. He cites the references of another pair of brothers, Sonny's father and uncle to show the harsh consequences. "The uncle, like Sonny, was a musician, but he got killed one night when some drunk white men ran him over in their car" (Goldman 232). Murder behind Sonny's uncle is not only the racism but also there is the interplay of socio-economic realities. Moreover, Marxism assumes that the lower-class often attempts to overcome their wretched situation but they are conditioned to face complexities throughout their life. Clark discusses the conditioned circumstance of the narrator in the story. "Though the narrator has escaped the most terrible consequences of growing up in the ghetto, then he is still maimed in some way-he knows it" (Clark 199). So, there are several factors, the narrator is entangled within his socio-economic and cultural intersectionality and he would be exclusively unable to come out from his proletariat class.

Many critics share their views of the story "Sonny's Blues," concerning the issue of racism and inequality between white and Black. They largely emphasize the unfair issues of racial discrimination to reveal the disadvantaged position of the Afro-American community, particularly confining in the ghetto at Harlem. They mostly rely on Sonny the protagonist of the story, his family members, and the black community of Harlem to put down their arguments. I do not outrightly disagree with the claims of these critics who view Baldwin's story "Sonny's Blues" dominantly from the stereotyped racism and its damaging impact on the overall aspects of the black community in American society. However, in the story "Sonny's Blues," my position will be slightly different from those critics for that I take the lens of classist ideology to explore the damaging impact on the Afro-American Community in American society because I believe that they are not only victimized

as black but also they are oppressed due to economic class in the society. Depending on the lens of Marxist Theory in relation to racism, in this paper I will discuss that how classism operates as oppressive ideology in Baldwin's story "Sonny's Blues."

In the story, the narrator tries to upgrade his socioeconomic status by having white-based education choosing the profession of high school algebra teacher. But, he does not seem to be successful because of his poverty-stricken Afro-American family inheritance. So, despite being educated holding a prestigious profession Sonny's brother has to suffer a lot deserving low rank in the comparison of the white people. To counter-argue the claim that classism is an oppressive ideology in relation to racism in the case of Afro-Americans I will show the race-based dichotomy between white and black that fuels the class-based-structural hierarchy in the white-dominated American society. Structurally, I have split this paper into three sections. In the first part of the essay, I will discuss how the narrator takes unsuccessful attempts to climb up his socioeconomic class despite several complexities. In the second part, I will compare two brothers the narrator and Sonny associating to their Harlem atmosphere, who are badly affected by the racial and classist attitudes of the society. Likewise, the final section of the paper will reflect the devastating impact of classism in the entire narrator's family along with his community.

Structural Reflection: Race and Class

In the story "Sonny's Blues," the unnamed narrator vainly tries to uplift his socioeconomic class adapting to the white-middle class society even with several difficulties. The narrator wants to escape from the environment of his hometown Harlem to elevate himself to the superior class of society. He comments over the atmosphere of Harlem and the condition of people with the connection of darkness. "They were filled with rage. All they really knew were two darkness the darkness of their lives.... which had blinded them to that other darkness" (Baldwin 18). The narrator does not follow the lifestyle of his community. Instead of limiting Harlem's pace of life, he obtains formal education which is totally different than other black folks. Why does he choose this teaching profession? Does he enjoy his own Afro-American folks and cultural heritage? The answer would be different because he converts his lifestyle following a quite different profession to be like the white civilized middle class citizen. Though he belongs to the intellectual level of society, he suffers much more than other blacks because he is emotionally and psychologically feels dislocated person. He articulates "I sat alone in the classroom a long time" (18). This situation is the reflection of an educated-black person. In fact, there is no one with him though he holds a prestigious job. In addition, a writer Richard claims "His success in assimilating into white-dominated society separates him from his brother and the world" (Richard 45). To change his status in society the narrator keeps himself isolated from his native socio-cultural practices. He pursues the white middle-class assertiveness to integrate into the superior white race and class of the society whereas his endeavors bring pain in him in reality. It means, the main source of his suffering would be his futile attempts to be in another white middle class.

In the story, the narrator habitually performs his classist attitude towards his own community mainly to his young brother. He almost dislikes fellows of his own community because black kids are not interested in school for formal education. For him, to be a good and better person everyone should go to school and have a school education. In other words, school is the best place to build up good manners cultivating civilized attributes. So, the narrator finds that his brother Sonny has no good manners because he drops out the school. He expresses his understanding regarding his brother which is not positive. "But now abruptly I hated him. I couldn't stand the way he looked at me, partly like a dog, partly like a cunning child" (19). He carries out the concept of good

demeanors which comes from the formal school education as Marxism believes that education is a superstructure through which the upper-class exercises the power to control the lower class. In addition, Narrator treats his brother's friend as a helpless beggar picking up the issue of asking for money. "Sure" I said. Don't waste I looked in my wallet and did not have a dollar only had a five" (23). The sympathetic expression of the narrator towards the boy represents his borrowed classist attitude which is much more harmful in his life as in the story *Duchoux*. In the story, *Duchoux* the central character Mordiane keeps secret his own identity even in front of his own son's family because of the fear of his degrading his class. "Mordaine stood up trembling with an intense longing to escape. That word "father" had struck him like a bullet" (Adhikari, et al. 82). Mordiane is in deep misery being isolated even from his own family members due to his classist attitude. Thus, in the case of both the narrator and Mordiane, the root source of suffering is their own exercise of classist arrogance.

In the story, "Sonny's Blues" two brothers the narrator and the protagonist Sonny are badly oppressed by the racial and classist attitudes of the society. The narrator does not like the stereotypical lifestyle of the black community. So, he has a kind of *internalized racism* as an inferior being in front of the white community whereas superior in the eyes of his own black folks. In fact, the narrator is in the situation of nowhere as Hughes expresses in his poem *Afro-American Fragment* "Of bitter yearnings lost, /Without a place" (Hughes, 19-20). He does not fit in either society rather remains in between two worlds-the world of white and the world of black. He implicitly exercises classism against the black community ignoring the black inheritance and adopting the white classist ideology. So, he suffers from the *intraracism* practices which terribly detaches him from the Afro-American cultural heritage. For him, he is not like other blacks because he belongs to the systematic profession of higher race and class. He calls himself "I somehow had the feeling that being a drummer might be all right for other people but not for my brother Sonny" (29). He does not like any family member who confines himself/herself to the spirit of the black community. Perhaps he feels the dishonor to keep on the only black legacy.

The narrator pressurizes his young brother Sonny to follow him and integrate into the white middle-class lifestyle giving up the passion for music for the socioeconomically secured future. He orders "well Sonny" I said gently, "you know people can't always do exactly what they want to do" (22). These lines are the true expression of a classist person. Actually, through these words as the senior brother of a family the narrator commands Sonny to catch up the right track of the white middle class for the life with moral implication. It's quite a moral and philosophy-loaded expression of so-called superior race and class. At this point, he appears as highly classist and racist on the surface while in deep reality he is the victim of *intraracial* racism practices. According to racists stereotypes, *intraracial racism* is operating when African American consider the discrimination within the own black community. "Of course a person who suffers from *internalized racism* will probably practices it because both forms of Racism "buy into" (112). Basically, people, those who occupy the upper class are expected to be treated as if they are superior to those below them on the socioeconomic ladder. In the story, the narrator expects his own young brother Sonny as well as other members of his community to be obedient to make a better life. It indicates that he does not merely carry on the beliefs system of the upper class but also quietly chases the classist manner embracing the lifestyle of the white-middle class.

On the other hand, the protagonist Sonny is portrayed as the victim of the classist ideology. He does not like to pursue the white middle-class ideology because he wants to keep on the passion of music. He is not going to face the clout of upper-race and class people in traditional classist

society. Sonny expresses his inner feeling in the letter “I wish I could be like Mama and say Lord’s will be done.... good it does to blame it on the” (23). His wish specifies that he limits himself within his black community pursuing the traditional family lifestyle like his folks and past generations. It means, Sonny is neither going to learn the lifestyle from the upper white class nor gain formal education and acknowledges assimilating to the middle-class white people. Rather he simply continues life as their older generation learning the Jazz Music. According to Marxist theory, “In traditional classist societies class is determined by birth and cannot be changed”(112). Sonny does not desire to promote himself into another better class because he internalizes his reality. Instead of ascending to the upper class, he takes the help of drugs as a therapy to set free from his miserable Harlem milieu. In reality, Sonny does not want to stay more in Harlem like he says “I want to join the army or the navy, I don t care. If I say I am old enough, they’ll believe me” (33). Through these remarks, we can understand that Sonny does not desire to be civilized educated like upper-class white people. He has a different direction of life as self-expression and personal freedom. No matter what society comments passion is the first and most significant thing in human life. He gets arrested by the authority in charge of drug addiction which is highly disgraceful, immoral, and illegal in the eyes of white upper-class morality principles.

As per the notion of racism, unfairly Afro-Americans are tagged as obsessive drug users in American society. “Although majority of drug users of all kinds in the United states are white, the inmates serving prison sentences for drug-related offences are black” (207). In the story the protagonist, Sonny is the typical black boy who represents the structural inequalities and stereotyped injustice of American society in two ways simultaneously race and class. In the story, “Sonny’s Blues” Baldwin has illustrated the destructive effects of racism which pushes the class disparity between the white- upper class and black-lower class in the entire family of the narrator along with the black community. Historically black people have been programmed in terms of racism which is the best way to exercise the classist operation against the entire Afro-American community. In fact, black people are split into two realities as Hughes says in his poem, “Afro-American Fragment”:

Not even memories alive
 Save those that history books create,
 Save those that songs
 Beat back into the blood-
 Beat out of blood with words sad-sung
 In strange un-Negro tongue (Lohani 29)

The present socio-economic and cultural status of black Americans is the acute consequence of historically unfair racial practices of the white-dominated American society. This story *Sonny’s Blue* beautifully echoes the existing disparity against Afro-American people through inhuman racist and classist practices even after the civil rights movement. In the story, all family members are severely affected by the white upper class. The narrator’s mother tells the murdering incident of Sonny’s uncle which is the finest evidence of cruelty. She describes to her son the narrator “This car was full of white men. They was all drunk, and when they seen your father’s brother they let out a great whoop and holler and they maimed the car straight at him” (29). This incident exposes the unsafe and painful reality of the marginalized black community in America. The white murderers often make fun of killing the black people because they consider themselves superior not only as a race but also they are socioeconomically powerful deserving the aristocratic position.

White people control all the superstructures of society such as the judicial system, law

education, economics, and so on. In contrast, black people do not have that access and influence on them. The narrator's father stays merely silent even after the heartbreaking murder of his dearest brother instead of going to take the legal process of filing a case against the white murderers at the court. Where is the justice in the case of the black community? There is neither legal nor social justice for Afro-Americans -no justice, no respect, and nothing at all. They just deserve the pathetic position outside of the legal sheds and public sphere not merely because they are black but also because they are poverty-stricken people whose fight is to come out of starvation on an everyday basis. The narrator says "Tears were gleaming on my mother face. There was not anything to could say". He never mentioned it" She said because I never let him mention it before you children" (29). The Mom's pain explicitly signifies that she cannot tell such dreadful killing scene of the family members due to extreme fear of the white community. Black people hesitate to take legal action going against white even in lawful matters displays that they are at an extreme level of injustice. In other words, white people seem to manipulate easily every social institution such as legal, political, social-cultural because they belong to the well-off class as socio-economically at the dominant position to oppress the Afro-America. In practical life even today, in the 21st-century blacks can be killed mercilessly by white authority. The murder of George Floyd in the middle street represents the dark brutality of racism in American society. "As his life was pressed out of his body, George Floyd called on his dead mother. In the days after his death, a picture of Floyd as a young in his mother's lap, sleeping, while her beautiful sepia face smiled at the camera was circulated on social media" (Harrel36). This incident is an unimaginable zero state of human rights and humanity. So, these kinds of socio-cultural, economic structure clearly depict the accurate fatal foundation of hierarchical American society. It means, how much unethical, immoral, and injustice act is done against the black people who are at the margin of society.

The story exhibits except the narrator, all characters who belong to the Afro-American community perform the low rank of works possessing substandard lifestyles. Their performed works truly represent the marginalized status of Afro-Americans. Here, Father, uncle, and other black folks involve in risky and low-level-life- works. Marxist views "The *Bourgeoisie*-those who control the world's natural, economic and human resources and the *Proletariat* the majority of the global population who live in substandard condition and who have performed the manual labor, the mining, the factory work" (Tyson 54). Blacks are stereotyped in their professions because the uncle works in the mill, the father, mother and all perform physical works for living rather than hold intellectual works and other business. For Sonny, formal education is nothing because he belongs to a black working-class family. In a conversation his response is that "I ain't learning nothing in school"he turned away from me and opened the window and threw his cigarette out into the narrow alley" (36). These uttered words prove that even the young generations of the black community would not be going to hold the prestigious and powerful position in the future.

Likewise, Black people seem to be trapped into the oppressive operation of classism and racism, not a single person rather an entire family and community. Still, Black youths run after the traditional family legacy rather than to desire to be in the mainstream society for power exercise. Qgnibene opines on the Afro-America community with the reference of Sonny as representative of his community's youth "At the nightclub, in Sonny's world, the narrator states that the music "hit something in me." It evokes an image of his collective past, and he sees that the tale of a people's joys and sorrows "must always be heard," for "it's the only light we've got in all this darkness" (Qgnibene 37). In fact, they do not have the culture as well as excess to be in the superior position of the society rather they are having the precarious future. As Parker in her essay *What is Poverty?* argues "poverty is looking into a black future...they will turn to the freedom of alcohol or drugs

and find themselves enslaved” (102). The future of black youths will be uncertain and unpredictable because they do not have an amicable environment in their formative years. They are the victim of the racist and classist ideology of American society.

Conclusion

Baldwin’s story “Sonny’s Blues” has represented a vivid picture of pervasive racism and classicism in American society. Although numerous historical movements have taken place to bridge two Races-White and Black to build harmony, the racial conflict between them is still hanging on even in the 21st century. Moreover, almost all characters of the story who belong to Afro-American heritage have been portrayed as victims of both racism and classism in society. It is evident that, in the story, they have been torn into two distinct socio-cultural phenomena possessing split identities. Thus, racism can be the root cause to bring fragmentation in American society which would encourage more disparity, inequalities, and injustice against the Black and ethnic minorities. In fact, the story depicts the social, political racial, and class structural inequalities over Afro-Americans and their deep impact as a dark scar on psychological, emotional, and moral aspects of American society. We merely look at issues of racial suppression against Afro-Americans but on a deep level, they would be ostracized in terms of socio-economic class-classism.

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