

A STUDY ON JAMES BALDWIN'S -'ANOTHER COUNTRY'

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Abstract

The question of transcending the material self and freeing the being from its surrounding influences has always embroiled humanity in an unsurmountable duel. But, the perceptible impossibility of developing an ability to transcend reflexive obedience to the laws of nature has also fascinated researchers for long. The very nature of this apparent impossibility can be traced to the ingrained conventions of human cultural practices, the reluctance to interrogate standards, and the inexplicable insularity. By analysing the belief in a transcendent reality, and the possibility of personal transformation through community engagement projected in James Baldwin's *Another Country*, I contend that these facets of the novel can help us comprehend the axiological significance of the inclusive humanism contained in it. Baldwin has been particularly critical of existentialist notions of alienation, angst and nothingness. He values individuality but sees social redemption as coming through replacing individuality with concern for and engagement with others.

Keywords: Immanent Frame, Exclusive Humanity, Inclusive Humanity, Reflexive Obedience

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Despite the pervasiveness of these nodes of reflexive obedience, human history has been perfused by instances of transcending the limits of immanence. In this article, I will suggest that the interrogation and transcendence of the immanent frame is not necessarily a phenomenon pertaining to theoretical positions, but a broader cultural phenomenon partaking of the inclusive forms of humanism. By analysing the belief in a transcendent reality, and the possibility of personal transformation through community engagement projected in James Baldwin's *Another Country*, I propose that these facets of the novel can help us comprehend the axiological significance of the inclusive humanism contained in it.

The roots of the concept immanent frame is traced to the seminal work *A Secular Age* by Charles Taylor who has encapsulated our locational processes and the captivation of our minds in the modern world. To expound his idea of the immanent frame, Taylor suggests:
So the buffered identity of the disciplined individual moves in a constructed social space, where instrumental rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular. All of this makes up what I

want to call “the immanent frame”. There remains to add just one background idea: that this frame constitutes a “natural” order, to be contrasted with a supernatural one, an “immanent” world over against a possible “transcendent” one. (542)

It is important to note here how Taylor is trying to juxtapose two world orders: The immanent, and the transcendent. His idea is to explore the plausibility of moral pluralism and transcendence as modes for fostering more inclusive forms of humanism. Central to Taylor’s criticism of the immanent frame is his finding that transcendence is no longer considered to be attainable, and this inability has led to exclusive humanism

– a reductionist approach to humanism which ignores any good beyond humanity.

Instead, Taylor proposes an inclusive humanist doctrine which not only unravels the inadequacy of exclusive humanism, but also presupposes the possibility of an inclusive humanism.

But long before Taylor developed his ratiocination over the problematic category of transcendence and inclusive humanism in the secular age, the black American novelist James Baldwin had shown strong convictions about the possibility of and the need for such transcendence over the immanent frame. All his life Baldwin remained engaged with the idea of exploring the extent and significance of human development towards greater compatibility and a more meaningful existence. Long after, Charles Taylor redeemed Baldwin by advocating the need for belief in transcendence:

By “humanist doctrine” I mean some view of man which tries to show the scope and/or importance of human development towards greater well-being freedom, unity, justice... All these views have been anti-Christian for at least one main reason: that Christianity has seemed to their protagonists a doctrine preaching the impossibility of human betterment or its irrelevance. (*Clericalism* 177)

Informed by this fascinating correspondence between the ideas of Baldwin and Taylor, I have analysed Baldwin’s *Another Country* (1962) which conspicuously anticipated most of Taylor’s philosophical engagements with the question of transcendence.

Critical approaches to Baldwin usually claim for him a redemptive and transcendental humanism. The central moment of experience of his characters are those in which they strive to transcend the immediate pressures of their environment and the limiting conditions of the social matrix, and ask themselves the fundamental questions about the nature of their own humanity. Although most of his protagonists are burdened by the pressure of concrete circumstances, the bitter taste of anxiety and inauthenticity, they still move towards disburdenment and reconciliation. Baldwin has been particularly critical of existentialist notions of alienation, angst and nothingness. His is a deep conviction that the way into blessedness and felicity is by entering into the complexity of oneself as well as the other.

Baldwin takes cognisance of the despair, alienation and emptiness of modern life and the angst arising out of it, but takes a stand against the spiritual wasteland and opts for brotherhood and community. He values individuality but sees social redemption as coming through replacing

individuality with concern for and engagement with others. The contours of his religious existentialism are quite clearly drawn out: the heart as a guide to morality, the psychic and spiritual triumph over angst, the celebration of individual identity while aiming for an equilibrium between self and the other. Baldwin offers love and suffering as elements to cope with the disturbing feeling of anxiety emanating from the void of nothingness. Almost all his protagonists most readily accept love and suffering as means to their self-discovery. Cass in *Another Country* voices Baldwin's philosophy of suffering: "Growing just means learning more and more about anguish. That poison becomes your diet—you drink a little of it every day. Once you've seen it, you can't stop seeing it that's the trouble" (341).

Another Country makes a serious and ambitious attempt by James Baldwin at presenting the quest for transcendence undertaken by a group of characters. The novel is different from his *Go Tell It On the Mountain* (1953) and *Giovanni's Room* (1956) in at least three ways: first, Baldwin shifts his attention from the existential search of the individual in solitariness to the quest for transcendence in a community; secondly, 'the sexual experience as liberating' which was in an inchoate shape in *Giovanni's Room* comes full circle in the course of this narrative; and thirdly, the all-black experience of *Go Tell It On the Mountain* and the all-white concern in *Giovanni's Room* are combined into a conglomerate black-white community experience. Transcendence in *Another Country* is presented not as a private but as a community affair which can be achieved only with spiritual communion with others.

The struggle for self-discovery by Eric, Vivaldo, Ida and Cass is not presented as a private affair but as one in which all of them try to understand each other through the recognition of their anguish. By understanding each other's pain and accepting their humanity they all recognize and accept themselves. This idea of conquering the existential void of otherness through recognition and acceptance of humanity forms the narrative content of *Another Country*.

Another Country raises the problem of the functional 'being' quite succinctly which entails the existentialist struggle of arriving at a definition of one's being that will be adequately sustaining in the face of the paradoxes of life, and to support another's complexity with love. The narrative abounds in both heterosexual and homosexual experiences like that in *Giovanni's Room*, but with the same purpose: "These are instruments for the exploration of being, the metaphors for self-definition and for responsibility centering the complexity of another" (Kent 26-27). *Another Country* can be easily divided into two structurally articulating parts though there are originally three. Book I is concerned with the existential failure of Rufus, the Negro musician, who is fighting within himself both the real and the imaginary existential concerns. Books II and III encompass the successful existential search by Eric, Vivaldo, Ida and their transcendence into "another country".

Rufus Scott is the most complex character in the novel. Engulfed by the ambiguity of his existence he becomes a living paradox. Outwitted by his inability to surmount the meaninglessness of his life he recoils from the demands of an authentic existence. As a consequence, he is rendered incapable of communicating either physically (sexually) or emotionally. His frustrations resulting from his existential failure lead to the accretion of hatred in

him and his inability to articulate that outrage renders him "a peculiarly passive Bigger Thomas, whose murderous impulses turn back upon himself" (Bone 43). Rufus is unable to either love or hate; all he can do is show a miserable despair and a self-pity. He goes on throwing excuses for his failure in extreme bad faith by squarely blaming the whites for his despair: "He was so tired, he had fallen so low, that he scarcely had the energy to be angry; nothing of his belonged to him anymore—you took the best, why not take the rest?"(9). As his hatred accrues within himself for the want of an outlet, Rufus becomes gradually estranged from his vital 'being', which culminates in his ambiguous attitude to people around him. He identifies himself with the Negro saxophonist who repeatedly wails from the saxophone the question, "do you love me?" (13), but fails to register his protest by hurling his outrage at the audience. Rufus' attitude to love is one of the uncanny dread, for he fears what he desires. Like the Negro saxophonist's music (do you love me?) he also gropes for love, but fails to comply when it was needed. His affair with Leona is one of attraction and repulsion, he never becomes able to participate in a relationship with Leona. A true existence is identified with participation, and 'esse' with 'co-esse'; one's existence, in fact, arises in communication with that of another. In complete bad faith Rufus spills the opportunity to come to terms with his (lost) functional being by not entering into a compatible relationship with Leona. He picks her with the conscious purpose of transmuting his fantasies of hatred and violence. The intimacy (mostly sexual) with Leona is a conscious self-deception adopted by Rufus, and therefore the feeling and reaching out for the other is completely absent. The sex between them, which ought to have been a functional and fulfilling experience turns out to be mechanical as Rufus deliberately denies himself an entry into the complexity of Leona's existence: "Her breath came with moaning and short cries, with words he couldn't understand... He wanted her to remember him the longest day she lived. Under his breath he cursed the milk-white bitch and groaned and rode his weapon between her thighs" (24).

Rufus' ambiguous attitude to the love making with Leona is the result of his guilt, "The true, inculpable guilt of having spurned possibilities of existenz" (Jasper 218). As a result, when Leona tries to "bug" him in her complexity as a person, instead of exploring his true 'being' in a relationship with her, he gets rid of her. By denying himself the opportunity of a search for being, Rufus forces himself further into the realm of inauthentic existence. He finally drives Leona into a nervous breakdown and plunges himself into despair. His ontic anxiety forces him into committing suicide, negation of the self as he throws himself into the Hudson river.

Against the existential failure of Rufus, the other characters' journey for self-hood is measured. "Rufus' failure in being is then re-tested in the lives of other characters who were, in varying degrees associated with him" (Kent 27). At the funeral of Rufus, Cass ponders over Rufus' failure and the existential struggle of other characters: Perhaps such secrets, the secrets of every one, were only expressed when the person laboriously dragged them into the light of the world, imposed them on the world, and made them a part of world's experience. Without this effort, the secret place was merely a dungeon in which the person perished; without this effort, indeed, the entire world would be an uninhabitable darkness. (98)

Rufus' death shifts the focus of the narrative to the existential search of Vivaldo, Cass, Ida and Eric. George E. Kent focuses on the responsibility of the characters to struggle for their functional being:

Vivaldo Moore, the Irish-Italian attracted to Rufus' sister at first partly through being a "liberal" and partly because of his sense of having failed her brother, must be made to confront her as a complex human conundrum.... Cass and Richard Silenski must abandon their oversimplified classification of each other and achieve a sense of reality in their marriage. Eric, the homosexual, must overthrow his Southern background and come to terms with himself in France. Everybody, indeed, must learn his own name. Thus, the lives of successive sets of people must come against the problems of being, love and involvement. (27)

Books II and III present Eric Jones as the existential epicenter towards which the other characters gravitate in their search for 'being'. Eric is a homosexual who has had several gay affairs since his adolescence in Alabama. As everyone knows, sex for Baldwin is replete with existential connotations as it helps a person enter the complexity of another human being and ascribe meaning to his own existence. Sexuality, particularly homosexuality, is a metaphor for the search for identity, for an understanding of life and responsibility to others within it, for the possibilities of rebirth. Eric's homosexual affair with Yves, a Paris street-boy happens to be the turning point both in the narrative and in the life of Eric. At the beginning of Book II the homoerotic description of Eric and Yves is rich in existentialist psychology: "Eric sat naked in his rented garden. Flies buzzed and boomed in the brilliant heat, and a yellow bee circled his head. Yves' tiny black-and-white kitten stalked the garden as though it were Africa, crouching beneath the mimosas like a panther and leaping into the air. (157)"

The association of the idea of homosexuality with that of Africa points to a kind of primal chaos, a kind of nothingness that offers the prospect of creating form out of formlessness. Bone says of Eric's achievement of a sense of self: "Through his commitment to Yves, he introduces an element of order into the chaos of his personal life. This precarious victory wrested in anguish from the heart of darkness, is the real subject of *Another Country*" (49). Baldwin treats homosexuality as a metaphor for the modern condition denuded of conventional standards, values and of sexual normality. Stripped of all traditional standards and values Eric is one of Marcel's being—an absolute plenitude—who is free from encumbrances and has to create, all by himself, his own values:

There were no standards... except those he could make for himself. There were no standards for him because he could not accept the definitions, the hideously mechanical jargon of the age... he had to create his standards and make up his definitions as he went along. It was up to him to find out who he was and it was his necessity to do this... (181)

Eric, the homosexual, becomes the paradigm of the existential man left with the responsibility of choosing his own values, and in choosing them he serves as a footnote to the twentieth century torment (278). Eric's self-revelation comes through his selfless love experiences with Yves which invests him with miraculous prowess. When he left New York, he was miserable without knowing what would become of him (200), but his love for Yves

transforms his misery into happiness and liberates his anguished existence. When he comes back to New York, Cass confesses to the radiance that has become a part of him: "You seem much happier. There's a kind of light around you" (199). In his love for Yves, Eric not only achieves his functional being, but also serves as a catalyst who helps Cass, Richard, Vivaldo and Ida come to terms with their anguished existence. Once he discovers his functional being, Eric puts on the priestly garb and sets out to lend his healing touch to the desiccated lives of Cass and Richard and Vivaldo and Ida. With his knowledge and experience of pain, suffering and love, the inclusive humanist leads the lost souls into the realm of meaningful existence.

Cass' and Richard's lives have been utter existential failures. With no love, understanding or compassion between them they are groping for self-discovery. Both of them have failed miserably to understand each other's complexity. The apprehension of the failure of communion which Cass has already expressed at Rufus' funeral, has taken over their lives. Cass and Richard live together, but like strangers and outsiders. During a conversation with Eric, Cass not only confesses her existential failure to him but also expresses her surprise at his newly found happiness. The illuminated life of Eric is nicely juxtaposed with the lacklustre existence of Cass asserting the liberating power of love and sex. Cass recognizes an unfailing confidence in Eric: "You seem very sure of yourself" (200), which is both enviable and laudable. She acknowledges the growth in him: "Growth is what will become of you. It's what has become of you" (201), and promptly reveals her failure in achieving any meaning in life: "Great men's wives, indeed! How I'd love to explode that literary myth" (201).

To give herself the feel of her presence as a human being Cass enters into an emotionally gratifying sexual affair with Eric that has no future as Eric himself confesses: "something is happening between us which I don't really understand but I'm willing to trust it. I have the feeling, somehow, that I must trust it" (244). Cass' sexual encounter proves to be immensely liberating through which she is introduced, by Eric's past experiences, to an unsafe, treacherous, but real vision of the world: "... She was relieved to discover that she was apprehensive, but not guilty. She really felt that a weight had rolled away, and that she was herself again, in her own skin, for the first time in a long time" (247).

The existentialist priest's healing touch engenders a new sense of being in Cass. She discovers the liberating prowess of love and the realization helps her understand Richard much better than before, as she says of him: "I did love him very much, he was my whole life, and he'll always be very important to me" (339). Cass' discovery of the meaning of her life comes close to her acceptance of suffering as the gateway to meaningful existence: "I am beginning to think that growing just means learning more and more about anguish. That poison becomes your diet—you drink a little of it every day" (341). The endurance of suffering leads her to self-knowledge and she understands her responsibility for Richard better than ever: "I watched Richard this morning and I thought to myself, as I've thought before, how much responsibility I must take for who he is, for what he's become" (341). The emancipating power of love tinged with suffering leads Cass to define herself through a committed, compassionate and reciprocal understanding of Richard.

Vivaldo is another character who is groping for his functional being in the labyrinth of existential chaos. Rufus' demise drives him to reflect on his own existence. In a highly suggestive scene where he is struggling with characters of his novel who will not "surrender up to him their privacy"; "they were waiting for him to find the key, press the nerve, tell the truth," he realizes that the condition of these characters is similar to his. He wonders "whether or not he had ever, really, been present at this life" or whether he, like others, had passed his life in a kind of limbo, of denied and unexamined pain" (111). He suffers terribly in his love for Ida, who is only playing with him as a mark of revenge for her brother Rufus' death. Ida never enters into any kind of compassionate communion with Vivaldo who shows serious concerns for her. He struggles with his doubts about Ida's compatibility. Torn between his despair and hope, Vivaldo passes through a phase of intense soul searching:

How did he take her what did he bring to her? If he despised his flesh, then he must despise her—and did he despise his flesh? And she despised her flesh, then she must despise him What were all those flicking confessions about? I have sinned in thought and deed. (260)

Since Ida is unrelenting in her revenge and does not give herself readily to the love of Vivaldo, the stalemate between the two continues. Vivaldo's excruciating passage alone does not suffice as his and Ida's conflicts are further compounded: "There was [sic] speedily accumulating great areas of the unspoken, vast minefields which neither dared to cross" (270).

The distance between them remains and compatibility still eludes their relationship, rendering them both incapable of attaining a spiritual communion and self-knowledge. He struggles to define him in the face of utter anguish emanating from the existential void:

And beneath all this was the void where anguish lived and questions crouched, which referred only to Vivaldo and to no one else on earth. Down there, down there, lived the raw unformed substance for the creation of Vivaldo, and only he, Vivaldo alone, could master it. (258)

At a time when Vivaldo is beaten down by his anguish, Eric's healing touch saves him from complete despair and gives him a hope of self-knowledge. The total spiritual and physical love experience between Eric and him turns out to be the turning point and immensely meaningful act of his life:

He held Eric very tightly and covered Eric's body with his own, as though he were shielding him from falling heavens. i But it was as though he were, at the same instant, being shielded—by Eric's love. It was strangely and insistently double edged, it was like death by drowning Vivaldo seemed to have fallen through hole in time, back to his innocence; he felt clear, washed, and empty, waiting to be filled. (324-325)

The liberating power of sex enables Vivaldo to come to terms with himself. His experience with Eric turns out to be epiphanic as he re-discovers himself: "All of his hope, which had grown so pale, flushed into life again... It was a great revelation...and made for unprecedented steadiness and freedom" (326). This revelation, charged with confidence and acceptance enable Vivaldo to go back to Ida, and listen to her confession unfazed, know her, trust her completely. By understanding Ida, he understands himself and thus spans the void between him and the

other. From the void of nothingness Vivaldo creates his values and achieves his being, and his (sexual) identity also emerges from the void.

Throughout the novel, Ida renders her life as a vast ocean of self-deception and thus keeping herself from entering into a meaningful relationship with Vivaldo. In bad faith she keeps herself detached from the love of Vivaldo and from self-discovery. At the end she is relieved of her entirely self-estranged life and her negative view of the world by the unfailing love of Vivaldo who enables her to come to terms with the meaning of her existence. Ida, who enters into an affair (an ostensible one) with Vivaldo in order to avenge the death of her brother, confesses to her deception and signs the bond of love and fidelity with him. As a sign of her self-acceptance she also "slips from her finger a ruby-eyed snake ring—a gift from Rufus, a symbol of her heritage of hate" (Bone 45).

The texture of *Another Country* runs parallel to Marcel's concept of 'being' which can be achieved by means of love, hope, fidelity and intense participation. "Love is real knowledge" and to "love someone truly is to love God" says Marcel in his *Metaphysical Journal* (62, 158). Love and fidelity bring Eric, Vivaldo and Ida to a definition of their lives and they find themselves on the verge of transcending their facticity. Eric stands at the epicentre of the novel. By accepting his pain, he becomes a fully aware, alive human and translates his love into healing others' pain and helping them overcome their anguish and lead a meaningful existence. He is the existentialist priest who performs the ceremonies of love and spreads the message of compatibility. His message to the people groping for meaning in their lives is clear in what he tells Vivaldo. Vivaldo says: "I think that you can begin to become admirable if, when you're hurt, you don't try to pay back. Perhaps if you can accept the pain that almost kills you, you can use it, you can become better" (329). Eric agrees and replies: "Otherwise, you just get stopped with whatever it was that ruined you and you make it happen over and over again and your life has—ceased, really—because you can't move or change or love anymore" (329).

Baldwin has always been a professed humanist, striving for the general wellbeing of man. To enable people to ascribe meaning to their otherwise precarious existence in the face of a contingent world fraught with uncertainties is his sole aim. He dared to see the reality in its naked majesty. He had his protagonists present a definitive attitude of looking at life, which expounds man's search for himself and his potentialities to create his own values in the world. Both Baldwin and Taylor are known for their questioning of the immanent frame which strategically excludes transcendence as a possibility. But, both of them have been able to decipher the not-so-absoluteness of the immanent frame, which, as Baldwin has shown in his *Another Country*, can be surmounted with a reflective acceptance of a meaningful life. Baldwin's core idea of transcendence is oriented towards developing a compatibility with inclusive humanism as a non-exclusive form. The perspective that emerges from our reading of *Another Country* is the transformative perspective which is articulated in terms of community transformation through transcending the immanent frame.

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