

## **Critical Analysis of a Non-Fiction Essay: 'Notes of a Native Son' by James Baldwin**

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**Abstract:** The life of James Arthur Baldwin (1924-1987) is full of mystery, difficulty and problems on the account of racism and skin color. The racial problems and issues are not associated with Baldwin only, but every black African American undergoes this unpleasant experience. Non-fiction essay 'Notes of a Native Son' of James Baldwin demonstrates the life of every black African American who comes across the problems of racial discrimination because of the skin color ultimately that results into the racial comments, sexual harassment, threats, unwelcome remarks and verbal abuses in the American organizations. Therefore, the difficulties are shared in his non-fiction essay. The lines from the essay 'Notes of a Native Son' are analyzed to provide an insight into hitches and hardships that black people sense and encounter in the United States and to help the readers to look at America from black people's vantage point. Marxism theory is adapted in order to achieve the needs of this current research. Here Marxism theory's application makes it easier for the readers to comprehend the differences between African black Americans and white Americans on the basis of ethnic grounds.

**Keywords:** non-fiction essay, racism, discrimination, life of black people, Marxism theory

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Racism inequalities have a number of forms in American society. This research paper focuses on some major events such as education gap, mass incarceration, employment, poverty, physical violence and abuses which are in great number against the black African American than white American. The historical literature illustrates the problems of black African American. They were victimized and still undergo racial discrimination in the organizations and workplace. They usually

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encounter a number of problems from the action of individuals, policies, institutions and police, the African Americans were not consented to apply in key posts, desired jobs and organizations and still witness the same circumstances (Fernandes and Alsaeed 2014, 56). Unemployment, challenges of promotion, psychological and emotional mistreatment are common issues to be faced by the black African American. There is a common perception found by employers that black African American are lazy and are not keen to work. In case, if they were appointed by any organization, they do not achieve the opportunities for promotion as white people do. They receive less authority and organization support. The black women witness racial comments, sexual harassment in the organizations and workplaces; it entails different kind of threats, unwelcomed remarks and verbal abuses. This impels them to abandon their jobs, however, they reply to racial discrimination and workplace angrily and aggressively (Ibid.).

Black African Americans are more in number being faced racial discrimination as four times more than white Americans when it approaches to be equally paid or regarded to receive promotions as 57% are black American in versus of 13% of white American, and black Americans describe three times more racial discrimination roughly when they want to apply for the jobs because of their race (Johnson 2017).

Unemployment discrimination is prohibited in workplaces, but black African Americans encounter it in everyday life. The negative images are linked with African American young women and men. There are organizations in the United States where African Americans are employed for lower status jobs. American jobs can be classified into primary and secondary jobs. The primary jobs comprise a highly paid job with the intake of high valued salary and comfortable workplace with a great ratio of stability with the opportunities of advancement (Fernandes and Alsaeed). Whereas the secondary sector consists of less paid jobs undesirably where salaries are low, work condition is quite poor and unstable. The opportunities for promotion are very few in number which may be possible on personal relationship rather merit. The dual market theory preserves the black people disproportionately, where most African Americans undertake their career in the secondary labour market. Pager discovered huge employment discrimination between white American and African American blacks. The statue of job between white Americans and black African Americans varies a lot on the account of promotion and

employment (Fernandes and Alsaeed, 62). African American encounter job discrimination because of lesser soft skills such as strong interaction skills and motivation skills, while, it is supposed that white Americans have better soft communication skills compared to black African American men which seems to be a possible factor of not availing position in primary jobs. Whereas, black African Americans (women) are regarded calmer to work, and they are less aggressive compared to white American women (Ibid., 63). Furthermore, African American women remain to suffer from racial discrimination and racial attitudes in the workplace. Almost seventy-seven per cent of African American nurses in three different nursing houses in Arkansas State informed about extreme discriminatory behaviour of the patients and management staff.

Sixty per cent of the black African Americans narrates that either they or their family member was mistreated or unfairly stopped by the police because of their skin color or race. Speaking about the court system, forty-five per cent of African Americans rail at the court system that either they or their family member was maltreated by the courts just discriminatory because of the black color. While talking regarding violence, forty-two per cent of all black African Americans demonstrate that they or a member of their family went through the experience of violence and thirty-five per cent states that they were threatened, and ninety per cent shared that they encountered sexual harassment on the same discriminatory bases of black African Americans. No difference is found between reporting of sexual harassment of black women and black men (Johnson, 2017).

Thirty-one of American African embodied that they shunned for calling the police or any other official authority when it was needed, as they feared that they will face racial discrimination. Moreover, twenty-two per cent of black African American responded that they shunned going to a doctor or consultant regarding health care by fearing of their color discrimination (Ibid.).

The brutality of police is a common thing against the American blacks; there are a large number of cases which express the vivid use of force and violence against the blacks. They come under the brutality of the police and they are brutalized. During 2015, 25% of black Americans were gunned down who were considered mentally ill by the police. 47 black African Americans of the countryside became the victims of police who killed them in 1990, 12 of them were emotionally drowned and got mentally ill. In 2002 a harmful accident

took place when a building manager called the police, a black man, Caesar Nathaniel Allen was threatening him. But when the police approached, it found Allen flourishing a knife on a route. The police first fired him with non-lethal pellets of oleoresin capsicum, but it did not succeed in causing him to drop a knife. The police ultimately gunned him down. The eyewitnesses witnessed that Allan did not threaten or resisting any officer, but he was simply gripping a knife in the middle of the road. Later a statement was issued informing that Allan was not keen to drop a knife, therefore, they finally killed him (Hutto and Green 2016). The police exerted the deadly and violent force against the blacks in all these accidents represented earlier when the communities demonstrated against the police, but it denied being responsible for violence against the black.

The African American cope with many forms of police brutality, seventy-six unarmed African Americans were murdered in the custody of the police. Police brutality is a normal thing against the Negroes. The black community is one of the poor and minor communities, historically being subjected to violence by the police eventually (Eguienta 2017, 18). The black people in 1960 planned protests and marches, after it, the brutality of police appeared as an automatic reaction: in a large number, white police officers used police organization as a force against African Americans. One may term it as 'us versus them' mindset of white police officers against black American citizens. They considered black people are not as civilized as white. Further, the white police officers comprehend their duty to protect the white population only; it means to protect them from black people (Eguienta, 42). They did not think of any black needed any protection from any white American.

The black Americans were treated as they were not part or citizens of American society. When the World War II took place, it was observed that the place where the black community was living in a small number began to grow: the police officers of districts did not behave well with these new entrants of the black community. Even the police officers began recruiting black people to justify their actions by asking them to bring proofs. Working condition seemed particularly difficult for black people on the fake accounts, threats and charges (Ibid.). Neither the black police officers were given promotions and further appointments, nor supported by superior officers; that was a common practice to turn a blind eye against the black police officers.

Additionally, black officers were encouraged to do violence against black African Americans. If any black wanted to become a cop, he had to define that he had no skin color tie to the black community (Eguienta, 43). Professor David Klinger of the University of Missouri-St Louis interviewed around hundred officers and jumped up a conclusion that there was concrete evidence of using deadly force against black defendants, and white officers do not want to appear as racist when they gun any black down. (Ibid., 45). An obvious example of racism of police brutality is emerged in the late 20th century, where a black taxi driver, Rodney King in 1991, was beaten up harshly after a car followed by four officers, three of them were white people and one was Hispanic, while many others officers observed this scene without any response. As a consequence of violence, the bones of King were broken and he suffered permanent brain damage, but a man who recorded this violent scene nearly from his balcony and forwarded it to a television station which was later aired nationally and internationally. The police officers were charged with violence but not found guilty of using deadly force, even not a single step was taken against those officers who observed the scene live and could not stop for a reason (Ibid., 46).

The killing of innocent black African Americans is a common practice there, as Michael Brown's death. He was an unarmed eighteen years old African American who was not well renowned before his death died at the hand of white police officers. He lived in a small city whose death scene was not recorded by any camera, but his death spread a national as well as international protest and anger. Brown lived in Ferguson, Mo. The events took place before Michael Brown, that was uncertain, not confirmed on account of contradictory testimonies. But it is very clear that on 9 August 2014, an officer named, Darren Wilson prevented Brown in a street where he was jaywalking and after angry debt and loud arguments, Brown was gunned down (Eguienta, 50).

This is, unfortunately, a reality of life that black people being killed by the white police officers; the residents of Ferguson, the majority were black people. It provoked outrage across the country. Eyewitnesses confirmed it that the black teenager was unarmed and was not direct or visible treat when the white police officer opened his fire many times at him. The second unfortunate thing was that the dead body of a young boy remained in the middle of the street for almost four hours not covered with any clothing by the people on the account

of fear. Ferguson democratic committee woman, Patricia Bynes gave a statement that a message was sent from law enforcement agency that they will do it with any black any time. In other words, black people cannot do anything against anyone about it (Ibid.). No reason was given by the police department why the dead body remained in the street for a long time. The department of justice issued a report after a year of death of Michael Brown on the Ferguson police department describing that it had come into a pattern of unconstitutional policing particularly against the African American community.

The department of justice came across with the fact that it was a common practice for city officials to urge the police department for fining the black community to enhance municipal revenues and as a result, it caused distrust of the black population (Eguienta, 51).

#### A BRIEF INTRODUCTION OF THE AUTHOR AND HIS CONTRIBUTION

James Baldwin was born in 'Southern Community' of Harlem, New York City, in 1924, America (Mcquade and Atwan 2003, 598). He was eldest of nine children. His father, David Baldwin, was a preacher, he was difficult to be understood by James Baldwin as a consequence, James Baldwin spent his more studying in libraries rather than home, and the accidents of racial abuse James affected James Baldwin. There appeared a heavy influence of racism in his writing (Brouwer 2017). Studying short story 'Going to meet the Man' published by James Baldwin in 1965, it explores issues such as racism, sexuality and identity (Cassel 2016, 2). With the contribution of James Baldwin in literature, the American literature touches the peaks in twentieth-century fiction and non-fiction as some famous works of Baldwin are 'Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone', 'The Amen Corner', 'The Evidence of Things Not Seen', 'Blues For Mister Charlie', 'The New Leader' and 'the Nation' (Daniels 1987).

Being a gifted writer from an early age, James Baldwin received an encouraging trigger from his teachers who recognized his talent at earliest. His stepfather passed away when James Baldwin was just 19 years old and administered him the freedom to make his own decisions, he was no longer under his father's authorization rule (Brouwer 2017).

He lived in New York City and grew up there. In 1948 he moved to France as he felt a threat of racism as being an African American in the United States. In France, he began to write critically about the racism,

social injustice, and sexual identity faced in America. His first novel appeared in 1956 'Go Tell it on the Mountain' and 'Giovanni's Room' in 1956. He also published his first collection of essays as "Notes of Native Son" during the same time (Mcquade and Atwan 2003).

It was understandable when the black rights movement was started in United States America, then James Baldwin will become a member of it (Brouwer 2017). After living in France nearly a decade, he came back to New York and became an important figure in the civil right movement for the rights of black people. Henry Gates Jr. praised him as a conscience of the American nation. He informed a whole generation of the United States about civil rights via his essays 'the Price of Ticket' (Mcquade and Atwan 2003, 598). He spoke on the civil rights and underlined them merely as a 'Negro author,' distinguishing his title as 'poet' and 'prophet' who prophesied the demise of the western culture of the white-dominated (Zaborowska 2016).

He contributed his three significant collections of essays on the racial discrimination intensely such as 'Notes of a Son' (1955), 'Nobody Knows My Name' (1961) and 'The Fire Next Time' (1963). Although during these years the civil rights movement was expanding across United States America. He was considered a key figure of the civil rights movement (Daniels 1987). An involvement of James Baldwin in the civil rights movement associated him with King Martin Luther, who was assassinated. James Baldwin's prophesies of racial discrimination were shattered. Despite this, he never refused to penetrate in the Black Arts movement whose belief was that their literature should remain entirely for black writers. Baldwin was attacked for entailing interracial love affairs and illustrating problems of multi-racial societies in his literary works such as essays and books (Brouwer 2017).

James Baldwin raised voice against the brutality of police who were beating black African American. An essay of James published by 'The Nation' as 'A Report from the Occupied Territory' starts with a tale of thirty-one years old salesman, father of two children, comes out from a home of a customer in Harlem and beholds police beating a black boy with their guns. When he asks why they beat the black boy, they turn to him and begin to beat him. They beat him so brutally that he loses his one eye, and brought into the custody.

Baldwin writes in the essay that whenever someone asks police the right of beating up a child, he is called 'cop hater' (DeBerry 2016). He

essays on ‘police brutality against the black African American’ caused constant harassment. His phone call was traced and tapped by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and its agents disguised themselves and chased him abroad through Britain, France and Italy (Brouwer 2017).

### REASONS FOR THE CHOICE OF ‘NOTES OF A NATIVE SON’, AN ESSAY FOR CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The main reasons for selecting the essay of James Baldwin are enlisted here to justify the value of this issue rising in several societies till today. Here the racial discrimination is explored and discussed in the context of African American society:

1. ‘Notes of a Native Son’ capture the lifestyle of the black people in America till the dawn of the civil rights movement.
2. This essay demonstrates how black people see American society.

And

3. It helps the readers to understand American society from the black people’s perspective.

‘Notes of a Native Son’ illustrates an image of James Baldwin’s life and other black people. It is the source of inspiration for all those who face racial discrimination, abuses, trauma, in their daily life. The critical analysis of James Baldwin’s life will assist people to know the sufferings and survival of black people at the curial strife.

### OBJECTIVES

The objective of this paper is a critical analysis of James Baldwin’s essay ‘Notes of a Native Son’ in order to discover the racial discrimination, oppression, abuses, traumas faced by black African Americans in the United States. On the other hand, this analysis will develop the critical perception of the readers to understand American black-white controversies from the perspective of black African Americans.

### METHODOLOGY

This research article applies ‘content analysis’ technique to find out the lines that demonstrate the oppression, traumas, class discrimination and abuses from a creative non-fiction essay ‘Notes of a Native Son’ by James Baldwin. ‘Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use’ (Krippendorff 2004, 18). Content Analysis entails a systematic way to analyze text. Content analysis as a research



technique offers a new glimpse, insights within a text and assists a researcher to comprehend events, situations and particular phenomena within a text.

### MARXIST THEORY: A BRIEF MODIFICATION

Marxism theory is one of the critical theories of the literature which deals with oppression, power, economy and politics. It can be applied in literary texts to find the mentioned elements with different dimension as a required hypothesis. This theory is based on the ideologies of German philosopher Karl Marx. He considered the human history as a series of struggles between classes; therefore, he divided all humans into two categories, in other words, the oppressors and oppressed on the basis of power, social economic conditions or natural resources (Selden and Widdowson 2005). However, for this research analysis, Marxism theory is applied in a new dimension as per the context of non-fiction essay 'Notes of a Native Son' by James Baldwin.

Meanwhile, the class is created on the basis of skin colors and ethnic grounds rather socio-economic condition or natural resources. Here Marxism theory is employed to show black Africans as oppressed and white American as oppressors. In Marxism theory, literary pieces are regarded as a reflection of social institutions from where they gain their origins. In other words, the work itself is regarded as a social institution. It has defined ideological purpose based on the background and ideology of an author.

### ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This research applies Marxist theory to an essay to find out the answers of the following questions:

1. What sort of oppression author indicated in an essay 'Notes of a Native Son'?

In his essay, James Baldwin illuminates oppression on the basis of skin colors:

He became more explicit and warned me that my white friends in high school were not really my friends and that I would see when I was older, how white people would do anything to keep a Negro down. Some of them could be nice, he admitted; but none of them was trusted. (Baldwin 1964, 591)

Here he creates two classes based on ethnic grounds by citing his own father who warned him, not to trust his white American friends as they

would try best to keep black Africans American down always. James indicates oppression of white Americans against Negroes, means black Africans Americans.

## 2. How ethnicity creates two classes?

Ethnicity creates two classes on the basis of skin colors in American. James depicts it as the black people are hated on the account of their skin colors by white American: "I have had time to become aware of the meaning of all my father's bitter warnings" (Baldwin 1964, 589). He represents that his father encountered many problems because of his black skin in American society. "I had discovered the weight of white people in the word." (Ibid.)

Baldwin believes that only white Americans have importance in American society. Black Americans have no significant role or participation as a civilian or citizen: "I saw that this had been for my ancestors and now would be for me an awful thing to live with and that bitterness which had helped to kill my father could also kill me" (Baldwin, 589). Here the author refers to his ancestors who experienced the bitterness of the racial discrimination which killed his father and had been a cause of his death too.

## 3. How does the author demonstrate social injustice?

Here the author vindicates the social injustice on the basis of skin colors. "Negroes were not served there, I was told, and they had been waiting for me to realize that I was always the only Negro present" (Baldwin, 592).

James Baldwin signifies the social circumstances of the black African Americans, even they are not served anywhere at the American restaurants because of their skin colors: "It was the same story all over New Jersey, in bars, bowling alleys, diners, places to live, I was forced to leave, silently." (Ibid.)

He discloses, in New Jersey, black Africans were not allowed to live and sit in bars, bowling alleys and dinner places as they have committed a sin born being black. They are deprived to penetrate the common public places on the ethnic grounds.

## CONCLUSION

James Baldwin's life matches with the life of every African American which is encircled by the problems of poverty, abuse, threats, unwelcome remarks, brutality, social injustice and racial discrimination. 'Notes of a Native Son' reveals a real picture of American society. Therefore, lines of this non-fiction essay are

analyzed to share the difficulties and problems of black African Americans which provide critical understanding to the readers of literature to comprehend the reality of American society from black people's perspective. Further, the Marxism theory is modified according to the needs of this research paper. The modification of Marxism theory and its application creates ease for students of literature to perceive the life differences between black African Americans and white Americans based on skin color causing racial discrimination in the society and country.

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