

Review Article

The Other of Black People in *If Beale Street Could Talk*

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Abstract: *If Beale Street Could Talk*, a novel composed by James Baldwin, is mainly concerned with issues of the entrenched racial discrimination in American society. It discloses a poignant and cruel fact that black people are regarded as second-class citizens who do not possess equal rights as whites do in the society dominated by white supremacy. The thesis engages on a close scrutiny of black people's living conditions to expose the deleterious impact of racism leading to their identity crises. It chiefly lays emphasis on three aspects. That is, black people are regarded as "the other" in the fields of law, education, and economy respectively. Through the careful interpretation, the thesis attempts to reveal the racial injustice giving rise to black people's inferiority. Due to racism, black people are forced to lead a humble life without basic rights as American citizens equal to white people.

Keywords: James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, The Other, Black People

1. Introduction

James Baldwin, an eminent African American novelist, essayist, playwright, poet, and social critic, is esteemed as one of the most influential authors in the American literature. As the life in Harlem, New York City aroused his enormous concern over black people's well-being, he had made a considerable contribution to expose the racial discrimination and prejudice black people encountered in American society by virtue of his distinctive personal experiences and superb writing skills. Thus, Baldwin is also deemed as "one of the most prolific literary chroniclers of the experience of race and ethnicity in the twentieth century". [1] As a vital representative of African American authors, a wide range of works including novels, short stories, plays, poems and essays were created such as *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *The Fire Next Time* (1963) and *Just Above My Head* (1979), to name only a few, most of which reflect the racial issues and have exerted a profound influence on other black writers including Alice Walker and Tony Morrison. [2] Among Baldwin's gorgeous masterpieces, *If Beale Street Could Talk* is also a splendid work that has received considerable acclaim.

Published in 1974, the novel immediately caused a sensation throughout the public and later the brilliant novel was listed as

the bestseller for five times. It primarily centers on the story of a young black couple, of whom the male protagonist named Fonny, falsely accused of rape, is victimized by the judicial system. In the process of saving Fonny out of prison, their families' strenuous efforts turn out to be too vulnerable to withstand obstacles in the face of racism. Patterson's definition of social death is in reference to institutional slavery; however, oppression as a substitute for death, or, as he explains, a conditional commutation, can be re-examined in the lives of blacks in the twentieth century". [3] By dint of the depiction of their living predicaments, the novel manifests the extremely wretched phenomenon that black people are ignored and rejected by white racists as outsiders in American society characterized by white dominance.

Since it is a wonderful work that has ignited a keen interest of a conspicuous number of readers, there is no wonder that the novel should be highly valued for literature criticism. There are plenty of scholars and critics at home and abroad who have already interpreted it from various viewpoints. Studies have been carried out to illuminate the work principally from the perspectives of the analyses of characters, the writing techniques such as Symbolism, the themes of protest, post-humanitarianism, US imperialism, the father-son motif, etc. Without doubt, the previous investigations have

profoundly promoted the academic progress for the clarification of this valuable masterpiece. In order to extract more essence and extend the studying scope, this thesis intends to embark on the illumination of blacks' identity crises in the novel. "The most troubling aspect of blacks' identity crises is their sense of otherness". [4] Through a detailed elucidation of their living conditions, the cruel truth that black people are treated as "the other" by white people is bound to be uncovered. Meanwhile, the sinful and vicious impact of racism that prevails in the society and undermines blacks' bliss of life is brought to light.

2. Blacks as the Other in Law

Even though the *Declaration of Independence* proposed the sacred creed that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" in 1776, [5] the grim actuality turns out to be a satirical fact that blacks are excluded from "all men" as they do not possess the basic human rights. The scenario that black people are not treated equally in law continues to be prevalent. In other words, blacks, in spite of their American citizenship, are not endowed with the same legal rights as whites'. It is pathetic that racial discrimination is so obstinate that it is still embedded in the flawed judicial system. Consequently, black people are treated as "the other" as they suffer from the lack of protection by the law, racial prejudice in the judicial operation, and the massive hindrance of safeguarding their legal rights.

First and foremost, black people are not protected by the law when their personal safety is threatened by white racists. It has long been an undeniable fact that blacks are in the vulnerable position under the oppression and persecution of whites. "In the South, the Negro's home is not considered sacred by the superior race. White men are neither punished for invading it, nor lynched for violating colored women and girls". [6] In particular, black women are vulnerable for the sexual exploitation by white men. However, there seems to be no effectively legal way for them to prevent such dreadful encounters. In the novel, Tish, a young black woman, is also confronted with the harassment by white men from time to time. When she is picking out tomatoes at a vegetable stand, a small, young and greasy Italian boy touches her hip in public. Apart from the vulgar behavior, he keeps molesting Tish by nasty words and attempts to grab her subsequently. At this moment, the white people around remain aloof and indifferent, which appears an indication that it is considered as a normal scene in their mind. Tish, in a extremely despairing situation, decides to turn to the cop for help, which is proved as a naive idea as the white cop, a racist holding prejudice towards blacks, intends to arrest Fonny who beats the boy for assault and battery. Tish describes her feelings toward him, "his eyes flicked over me in exactly the same way the boy's eyes had". [7] She senses that the cop's eyes are filled with filth. As she looks into his eyes again when he speaks to her in the street at another time, Tish feels that it is seduction which contains the premise of rape. It certainly reveals that the policeman is

another white man who desires to harass black women. Furthermore, it also testifies the futility for blacks to find protection from the law as white racists take it granted that it is justified to offend blacks, which essentially accounts for the sense of insecurity of blacks living in the disadvantaged position.

Besides, black people are confined in the alleged stereotype of degraded criminals due to racial prejudice so it seems to be a widespread and frequent phenomenon that plenty of blacks, falsely arrested and accused, are condemned to imprisonment or even death. For instance, Danniell Carty is a representative of black victims under the white ideology of blacks as transgressors against law and order. As a defenseless negro, Danniell is unjustifiably framed by the police for stealing a car. Incapable of driving a car though he is, ridiculously, he is handcuffed, put in the lineup of suspects and then recognized as a car thief. The truth is that he is intimidated by the white policemen for a more serious charge as there is marijuana found in his pocket. Thereafter, he is too timid and scared to resist so that he ultimately enters the guilty plea. Obviously, the two-year sentence completely destroys his life and continues to impair his psychic world after he leaves the jail. "Danniell, who cannot abandon his mother, yet longs to be free to confront his life; is terrified at the same time of what that life may bring, is terrified of freedom; and is struggling in a trap". [8] Therefore, there seems hopeless for Danniell as a black man to establish his identity with dignity in the society, who is prone to receive the unjust treatment by the judicial operation.

The similar tragedy falls upon Fonny as well when he is falsely accused of raping a Puerto Rican woman named Victoria Rogers Sanchez. In Fonny's case, the wickedness of racism is further unmasked drastically. In reality, it is the white policeman, Officer Bell, as a radical and brutal racist who bears a grudge against Fonny and intends to kill him by fabricating the fake testimony which Victoria continually repeats. Since he is the sole black man, an ironic plot which should be paid attention to is that Fonny is picked out of a lineup with "a whole lot of pale dudes". [9] Thus he becomes the scapegoat owing to the racial prejudice towards blacks in Victoria's presumption. The Puerto Rican, a member of another maligned minority, must be treated as outsiders in American society as well, "but the formula must be modified to account for the racism which light-skinned Puerto Ricans display toward Black Americans" (Burks 86). [10] Apparently, black people's skin color tends to be the sole criterion for the judgment of their identity and personality. All in all, racism relegates blacks to guilty offenders.

Last but not least, the impediment of safeguarding their legal rights seems to be extremely formidable for black people. It is exceedingly tough to defend themselves once they are prosecuted for violating the law regardless of the fact that they do not commit any crime. Even worse, the majority of lawyers are white people unwilling to defend black prisoners. As Danniell assets bitterly, "my lawyer is really their lawyer". [7] Danniell's lawyer does not prove that he is not guilty of stealing a car. Actually, it becomes a common rule that blacks

are bound to be condemned by the court so there seems to be no significance to give any concern for their cases. As a consequence, when Fonny's lawyer, Mr. Hayward, tries his utmost to verify Fonny's innocence, objections arise among his colleagues. Mr. Hayward is faced with white people's scorn and alienation on the ground that blacks are not supposed to possess legal rights to defend their lives. In addition, there is a multitude of interference along the way of assisting Fonny out of prison due to racism in the judicial system. Since the judicial branch mainly consists of whites, there is the obscene power and the ferocious in it. "Sympathetic or merely intelligent judges are as rare as snowstorms in the tropics". [11] As a result of that, it is an arduous task to seek an impartial judge who is rid of racial prejudice. What is more, hopeless and desperate is Fonny's situation as every witness for him is immobilized, isolated or intimidated by the D. A.'s office, the prosecution and the state. Victoria, the raped victim and principle witness, has a miscarriage and gets insane after losing her baby. Another witness, Danniell, arrested by the D. A.'s office, is transferred to a prison upstate. Thereupon, the road to winning Fonny's case is blocked off with a host of barricades. Given that Fonny is a black man, the judicial system permeated with racial bias hinders the endeavor for his freedom. Hence, there is little possibility for blacks to claim legal rights under such an unjust legal system.

From what has been discussed above, the conclusion can be drawn that black people are regarded as "the other" in terms of their inferior position deprived of basic rights in law. Although they are living in American society with white people, black people are not protected by the law. Despite of the fact that fairness is the soul of ruling of the judicature, they still live in despair suffering from legal injustice. Racial prejudice in white racists' mind stereotypes blacks as repulsive criminals against law. Then there is a pervasive and absurd phenomenon that a conspicuous number of black people are arrested by the white cops even though they are not guilty. More miserably, blacks find out the harsh reality that it is too desperate to safeguard their legal rights for their lives and freedom. Correspondingly, blacks are refused to possess the legal status as American citizens equal to whites.

3. Blacks as the Other in Education

Without doubt, racial inequality in education is another facet that reduces black people to the dire social status as "the other". The history has witnessed blacks' agonizing conditions in education since a long time ago. The prevalent belief that blacks were not allowed to enjoy the privilege of education gave rise to their difficult access to public education before 1850. [12] Later, even when black people were admitted into schools, they were not provided with excellent educational facilities. "Two black college, Lincoln in Pennsylvania and Wilberforce in Ohio were established in the decade before the Civil War. However, for the most part, education for free black people in 1860 was separated and unequal or nonexistent". [13] The educational conditions for

black people are evidently dreadful. There are few decent schools for them to get formal education. What is worse, the real purpose of schools for blacks is to serve for whites. Then it is an inevitable phenomenon that the overwhelming majority of blacks are poor-educated.

To begin with, it is a frustrating truth that a vast number of black people have no choice but to enter mediocre and insufficiently-equipped schools which are not furnished with adequate educational facilities and resources. Black kids maybe receive informal education in welfare homes which do not even reach the standards of schools. It is displayed that "kids up to the age of fourteen or so, all colors" are educated by blacks who themselves might not be well-educated. [14] In addition, a vocational school is one of the few options for black children to be admitted into. Be that as it may, the so-called school solely teaches kids to "make all kinds of shitty, really useless things, like card tables and hassocks and chests of drawers which nobody's ever going to buy". [15] In a real sense, it is utterly obvious that the vocational school does not conform to the criteria of a formal educational institution either. Black children who attend these school, not educated to read or write, are compelled to engage upon insignificant physical labors with their hands. In other words, they are not treated as normal students who are supposed to acquire precious knowledge or beneficial skills for the sake of the well-being of their future. Above all, it is a dismal fact that there are scarcely qualified schools set up for black people. As a consequence, black kids feel themselves in a distressing condition without the access to a good education.

Then, there is a thorny issue that most schools for black kids are established by wealthy white people whose real intention is to intensify black people's inferiority. The aim of these schools is not to improve the educational level of black children but control their mind to serve for the white-dominated society. The abhorrent truth eventually occurs to Fonny when he is attending the vocational school that he is at the mercy of the rich whites. The founders' assertion for their goal of running these schools for blacks sounds benevolent but, in fact, further exhibits their hypocrisy satirically. "They say the kids are dumb and so they're teaching them to work with their hands". [16] Nevertheless, the reality proves that their loathsome intention is dramatically inconsistent with what they say. It surfaces that "the people who run these schools want to make sure that they don't get smart: they are really teaching the kids to be slaves". [17] In most white people's eyes, black people are still portrayed as the image of humble slaves. The racial prejudice is too deeply entrenched to remove so that whites take advantage of educational methods to command blacks. It reveals that white people, in a superior position, consider black people as degrading servants whose responsibility is to serve whites rather than their equal compatriots. As blacks are defined as stupid and moronic slaves, those schools established by whites are used as tools to stifle blacks' intellectual development and force the idea on them that they ought to keep on toiling for whites.

Finally, it is a universal and conspicuous phenomenon that

most blacks are not well-educated as a result of the inequality in education. Owing to tremendous obstacles, blacks find it hopeless to gain the opportunity for a fair education. Hence, it is commonplace that plenty of blacks make the decisions of dropping out or discontinuing their higher education at an early age. Fonny, for example, determines to quit school as soon as he comes to the disillusionment that he is merely taught to do manual labor in the vocational school, the real object of which is to train the black kids to be slaves. Likewise, Ernestine also abandons her plan for going to college on account of the presumption that there is no meaning for blacks to pursue further education. It is an undeniable truth that education is a preparation for one's life, whereas black children universally do not get the access to formal education and hence struggle desperately in their lives. Without the guidance of a good education, most black kids are inclined to miss their direction for their future. They fail to discover their aspirations and ambitions and thereupon their destinies are doomed to degeneration and degradation. "The kids had been told that they weren't worth shit and everything they saw around them proved it. They struggled, they struggled, but they fell, like flies, and they congregated on the garbage heaps of their lives, like flies. [17] Losing hope for a bright future, most of black kids, loitering the time away without goals for life, degenerate to drug addicts or even criminals in jail. Of course, black kids are victims due to their lack of the privilege of a good education, who are unable to see their self-worth and self-esteem.

In brief, black people are considered as "the other" in white people's view from the respect of the unfairness existing in education. Generally speaking, blacks do not embrace the equal right for education. It is entirely terrible that there seems to be no opportunity for blacks to attend schools as decent as whites' for formal education. Moreover, those schools which enroll black students are predominately set up by whites. To be frank, the immoral intention of the founders is revealed to take control of black children's mind and shackle them to be slaves. Consequently, the phenomenon is undoubtedly widespread that the vast majority of blacks are poor-educated leading to black kids' loss of direction for life. Thus, black people, who are denied to receive a good education, are not treated as dignified citizens, which further aggravates the problem of racial inequality ineluctably.

4. Blacks as the Other in Economy

Similarly, black people in face of racial discrimination are treated as "the other" in economy. Quite a few white people harbor the idea that "somewhere between man and cattle. God created a tertium quid, and called it a Negro". [18] Whites disdain and despise blacks as animals who are rejected to possess the equal economic position in the society. "On the eve of the Civil War, most black northerners lived in cities, but they gained little from their urban residence". [19] Even after the war, the vast majority of blacks continue to live in poverty. On the whole, large quantities of blacks, segregated by whites, lead an impoverished life hurdling together in slums in the

corners of the cities. The black characters are struggling to survive in American society resulting from the unfavorably economic conditions. In general, black people have the inferior position in economy battling against poverty for life.

First of all, blacks have the lowest economic status to maintain their average life in despair. In New York, the obstruction of the bliss for life is extremely massive for blacks to break down. As a case in point, Frank endeavors to support his family by managing a tailor shop, the result of which turns to be a failure. Ultimately, it is nearly impossible to maintain the business since there are few customers patronizing the shop. As Tish claims, "I kind of wonder who he ran the tailor shop for: we didn't know nobody who had money to take clothes to the tailor". [17] Therefore, most blacks are destitute lacking the economic condition to keep other blacks in business. Even though blacks living in New York are not as poor as those in the South, the economic life of them is still not improved for their lasting poverty. Furthermore, blacks are ranked in the lowest class in economy under the exploitation of other higher classes. It is a biting simile that underprivileged blacks are like the prey of vultures including the lawyers, bondsmen and all that crowd circle around the poor. [20] Certainly, in the society similar to the Sahara desert, blacks tend to be oppressed by the wealthier whites and even those who are not richer are eager to exploit blacks as well. Painfully, the racial bias towards blacks in the society leads to their poverty-stricken life.

Moreover, most of occupations offered to black people are generally low-paid and menial. The majority of blacks are in the inferior economic position as they are restricted to choose humble and unskilled jobs. In general, those jobs for blacks are of low income and least of pleasure. Black characters are reluctant to take up their jobs with small salaries for survival. Joseph is a worker on the docks who harbors no interest in the job at all as he always has to "curse out more than one or two people all day long or threaten somebody with death, inferred by Tish's interpretation of his word of "all right". [21] Similarly, to cope with the problem of starvation, Fonny works as a short-order cook in a barbecue joint to feed himself. In the same manner, Tish as a colored girl takes the job working at the perfume center of the department store. It is regarded as a particular daring and progressive action to give Tish this job for the reason that employees in the department are scarcely ever blacks. It is a belief that blacks, who are humble and inferior, are not qualified to work in such a high-class place chiefly serving for the wealthy customers most of whom, to a great extent, are whites. Additionally, Tish derives no joy from her job as she complains, "I stand behind that damn counter all day long, smiling till my back teeth ache, letting tired old ladies smell the back of my hand". [22] It is plain to see that the job not only exhausts her body but also tortures her mind. What is more, Tish accumulates more aversion towards her job for she is not respected by white customers, especially white men. Frequently and constantly, she feels helpless when a white man carries her hand to his nostrils and holds it there. The behavior is offensive but Tish is not permitted to prevent it from happening.

Finally, black people's poverty is further reflected acutely by their adverse living environment. A substantial number of needy blacks live miserably, devoid of good housing conditions. For example, Fonny and Tish, while seeking their wedding house, are not rich enough to afford the housing projects which are built for low-income families. In addition, they realize that the other places in Harlem seem to be even more worse than the projects. [23] The atmosphere is too disgusting to start a new life as far as Tish is concerned. Nonetheless, there are numerous babies who are born in those places and grow up with "rats as big as cats, roaches the size of mice, splinters the size of a man's finger". [24] The description of the environment is appalling and startling which realistically pictures the misery of the existence of blacks. Obviously, it is a miracle for those children who succeed in surviving it. On the other hand, the truth strikes Tish that a host of babies are not fortunate to escape the tragedy of death, which seems more discouraging. Actually, she realizes that there is no hope to search for a rosy future in such an inferno-like environment whether they survive or not. Hence, Tish and Fonny strive to find an ideal place in case that their own baby might sink into the similar mire which inevitably gives rise to a lamentable destiny. It is tragic that blacks are trapped in the detrimental living environment due to their poverty.

To sum up, it can be seen from the analyses above that black people are regarded as "the other" since they are declined to possess the economic status in the racist society. Belonging to the lowest economic class, most blacks live in poverty vexed by the problem to support their families and are subjected to the economic exploitation by other higher classes. In addition, their low-paid and monotonous jobs do not bring them sufficient incomes to enhance their economic position. Even more wretchedly, blacks' lack of money lead to their despairing living environment in which black kids are doomed to a gloomy future. Manifestly, the inferior economic position, to a large degree, hampers the attainment of their black identity.

5. Conclusion

Generally speaking, *If Beale Street Could Talk* realistically reveals black people's identity crises as they are treated as "the other" in American society. Composed by James Baldwin as a black author, the novel vividly and seriously exposes racial inequality between blacks and whites. In the racist society, blacks do not receive the fair treatment as American citizens.

In their miserable life, black people are regarded as "the other" for their inferior position in law, education and economy respectively owing to the deleterious impact of racism. To start with, blacks are treated unjustifiably in law. There is no protection by the law for blacks when their personal safety is threatened by whites. Racial prejudice further frames blacks as degraded criminals. Moreover, the impediment of safeguarding their legal rights seems too enormous to overcome. Next, black people also encounter unfairness in education. There are few decent schools for them to receive formal education. Satirically, the real intention of

those school for blacks is to train them to be slaves serving for whites. As a result, it is a widespread circumstance that most blacks are not well-educated. Last but not least, the miserable economic conditions reveal their inferiority in the society as well. Blacks suffer from economic exploitation struggling in the lowest economic class, most of whom are reluctant to take up low-paid jobs. Inevitably, their poverty reflected in their filthy living environment triggers more wretchedness for their destinies.

In accordance with the picture of the dreadful life of blacks, their lack of equal human rights, especially in law, education and economy sheds light on the harsh truth that blacks are considered as "the other" by the racist society. "In general whites refuse to be identified with blacks". [25] The white supremacy denies the American citizenship of blacks and downgrades their social position.

The significance of the thesis lies in its object to explore the novel from the perspective of the identity crises of black people as "the other". Accordingly, it clarifies blacks' second-class identity to reveal the unfair treatment they encounter in the racist society. Hopefully, it is likely to enrich the research of the glorious masterpiece and to enable readers to pay more attention to miserable living conditions of blacks and understand the wickedness of racism in American society more profoundly.

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