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Understanding Struggle and Identity in America: A Synthesis of Baldwin, Coates, and Personal Reflection

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Introduction

The theme of equality, identity, and respect is related to the problems of America from the standpoint of the fight for the freedom. Indeed, many authors throughout the history have been trying to describe the issue and provide the directions that should be followed in the future. Some of those books include *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin and *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates. James Baldwin deals with the problem of racism in the United States from the standpoint of ethics and spirituality since he describes the issue against the background

of the civil rights movement in the second part of the 20th century.

At the same time, Ta-Nehisi Coates discusses the idea of the continuity of racial discrimination in the developed country at the turn of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. However, both Baldwin and Coates attempt to assist future generations even though they view the issue differently. Indeed, Baldwin could be described as cautiously optimistic regarding his attitude, while Coates has a critical view of the American society. This essay attempts to investigate the ideas of Baldwin and Coates, their implementation in the modern American society, and reflection on them.

Baldwin's Vision of Race, Religion, and Identity

The author presents a critique of American culture, especially in relation to matters of race relations. An interesting element of Baldwin's critique of American culture is that racism is not a political but a moral problem, playing a key role in shaping American identity as compared to being a political problem. For instance, Baldwin asserts that "the history of the American Negro is the history of America" (Baldwin, 6). Thus, the discomfort that Baldwin causes is that racism is often the cornerstone of American success.

In addition, Baldwin's critique includes discussions about religion. The author criticizes religion for its inability to address issues of racial discrimination within America, in part because Baldwin was brought up with Christianity in his domestic environment. Religion plays an important role in forming unity and providing hope to believers. However, Baldwin argues that, if religion fails to speak out against injustice, then it will help to maintain the oppression of the status quo (Baldwin, 36). This is an important element of the author's narrative because it highlights how organizations of moral authority can be detrimental to society.

Racial discrimination among black people and white Americans is yet another aspect considered by Baldwin. To start with, he observes that racial discrimination results into distortion of identity through misrepresentation, misunderstanding, and denial. In this case, white Americans are less willing to accept that discrimination exists because racism negates their claims about morality and innocence (Baldwin, 47). Such unwillingness leads to no change at all

since discrimination continues in an immoral way. At the same time, African Americans are in a position where their identity is always being questioned.

Coates' Perspective on the Modern American Reality

However, having written about America from a different period in time, Coates follows Baldwin's ideas as well. Art by Coates is characterized by the difficulties associated with being Black and facing racial prejudice. According to Coates, "in America, it is traditional to kill the black body—it is heritage" (Coates, 103). Such statements can be interpreted as modern fears concerning oppression, mass imprisonment, and police brutality.

Speaking about Coates' art, one should note that "The Dream" invented by Coates is one of the major themes that he addresses. "The Dream" implies a perfect image of America as a country where equality prevails, and everyone is entitled to equal rights and freedom. Yet, Coates defines "The Dream" as a perception of existence in a country that was created due to ignorance and exploitation. "The Dream is the idea that there is a country and you are in it" (Coates, 11). While Baldwin thinks that love and understanding can help improve America, Coates takes a pessimistic position regarding the country.

Moreover, there is another issue that Coates discusses which is generation based responsibility. He turns to his son in order to equip him with knowledge regarding all the realities that he will face in life. He discusses the vulnerabilities of the black body while roaming around freely in public areas. He says that he needs to be always ready to cope with his surroundings as a black man (Coates, 14). This approach makes the humanity of Coates come alive as he presents how systemic issues shape personal experiences.

Continuity of Struggle Across Generations

Similarities can be drawn when looking at the continuity of struggle from one generation to another. Some of the problems discussed by Baldwin have continued being faced by Coates despite all the developments that have taken place since the Civil Rights period. What needs to be noted is that racism is not a thing of the past, but continues playing an important role in American society.

As Baldwin argues, racism forms a part of the American character and cannot be eliminated (Baldwin, 55). The problem of the existence of racism is also raised by Coates when he describes the current situation in America when the phenomenon of racism exists in various spheres of social life such as mass incarceration, economic inequality, and inequality in education (Coates, 89).

Another point where a similarity can be found is that both writers believe in the necessity of taking action and recognizing the truth. While Coates is critical of those who do not want to recognize some unpleasant realities of life, Baldwin calls on Americans to recognize the truth and take responsibility for their actions (Coates, 98).

Changes in American Society

It should be noted that American culture has undergone tremendous changes, notwithstanding the existence of many common elements. Segregation as an officially approved policy was abandoned long ago, and there were great advances in civil rights protection. Members of black communities could now participate more actively in politics, mass media, and education, which provided them with many new opportunities.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to say that all the changes had a positive effect on solving the problem of discrimination. As demonstrated by Coates' research, the manifestations of racism became increasingly sophisticated and institutionalized, thus posing a greater threat for black citizens. Now they suffer more from the problems of residential, economic, and even legal discrimination and incarceration.

Apart from the above, the modern community has experienced considerable evolution in terms of addressing the social problems. Social media technology brought many issues to light, and thus the protests like those organized by the Black Lives Matter movement attracted widespread attention from the public. Nevertheless, such websites could be used to spread misinformation and hate, hindering constructive dialogue.

Personal Reflection and Connection

Although I may not have experienced what Baldwin and Coates write about, their words speak to me in a way that transcends my personal experience. I am no stranger to having to juggle

responsibilities, duties, and personal identity as a member of the modern world. The stresses of money, family, and society are just a few examples of struggles that all humans have in common, regardless of their background.

Their words bring awareness and empathy. Their words inform the reader of the larger system of society at play in each person's life and how it is essential to be informed of the system to build a more equal world. Racial discrimination may not affect a person personally, but it is essential to realize the impact of it and to strive for equality.

Lastly, their words inspire reflection on one's social roles. Change can come in many ways, whether through political activism, education, or personal actions. It is crucial to recognize that younger generations are granted the chance to shape the future and resolve the issues raised by Baldwin and Coates.

Advice for Future Generations

Both Baldwin and Coates aim at educating younger generations, and their observations are still applicable. One of the major lessons of their books is being aware of certain social issues and the history of the country. It is possible to make significant changes in society only if one is aware of everything that happens there and its background.

Another lesson of both books is that one should try to challenge the stories told about society. The concept of "The Dream" used by Coates demonstrates that it can be rather simple to live in a delusion or simplify everything around oneself. Younger generation will be able to gain a better understanding of the surrounding environment by trying to change these stories.

One more common feature described in both books is resilience of the characters. Despite all the problems, characters show that resilience exists. It will be possible to use it for the same purpose as characters did.

Conclusion

It is fair to state that the theories presented by both Ta-Nehisi Coates and James Baldwin concerning the nature of America have proved to be highly insightful, taking into account the complexity of the process of its formation and development. Although these theories were

developed at different periods in time, they have some common points since they both concern the topics of social inequality, discrimination, and self-identity. Nevertheless, there still remains a lot of unfinished business when these concepts are considered together and used in today's reality.

References

Baldwin, J. (1963). *The Fire Next Time*.

Coates, T.-N. (2015). *Between the World and Me*.