

## Interplay between Marginalized Sexuality and Psychology in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*

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### Abstract:

This article explores the interconnectedness between sexuality and the human mind found in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*. It focuses on homosexuality and the psychological dilemma. The protagonist, David, suffers an internal struggle of whether to move with societal norms or to get struck with his sexuality. While discussing on gay male sexuality, this novel reflects the real-life experiences of Baldwin. The conflict between mainstream and marginalized sexualities is discussed. Sexual variation of homosexuality has something to do with psychology. The inferiority complex as psychological defect is more prevalent in non-heteros. Baldwin delves deep into characters to understand how closely the characters are related to one another. He highlights the complex relationship prevalent in the characters. The constructions of hetero- normativity lead the protagonist David to suffer from claustrophobia. On the other hand, the novel can be read from the psychological stand point of masculine behavior. This article could be viewed from Freud's concept of homosexuality in relation to Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*.

**Keywords:** Gay Literature, Homophobia, Claustrophobia, Queer Studies, Sexuality.

Queer studies include gay literature. It illustrates a man's homosexual behavior in the modern era. In almost all nations, homosexuality has been looked down upon as a crime throughout history. Strong laws against homosexuality are still prevalent in many countries. Gay literature specifically addresses many issues related to human behavior and sexuality, such as homophobia, same-sex desire, and the mental psyche of an individual. From history to the present day, homosexuals have felt estranged from society. Both inside and outside homes, those who have been identified as "homosexual" face abundance of difficulties. Having placed in a marginalized position they are forced to deal with the challenges of denied opportunities, often bullied, attacked, and resulting in suicidal thoughts. There are many gay writers in the literary world, like Langston Hughes, William Thomas Beckford, Jean Genet, and Oscar Wilde. Contemporary authors Colm Toibin, John Boyne, and Michael Cunningham are regarded as serious gays.

In earlier times, Greeks were very supportive of homosexuality. The Greek poet Sappho, stands out from other authors since her poems have been labelled erotic and contain homosexual themes, is also known as "Sappho of Lesbos" because of her homosexuality. Some writers glorify homosexuality, claiming that since heterosexuals coexist in modern culture, being homosexual is normal. Even James Baldwin states that there is nothing wrong in being homosexual. According to the sexual identity and behaviour the term coincides into it. The identity of an individual results in the factor of identifying biological, psychological and social connections. The sexual factor implies the identity as one of the important concepts in queer.

Queer theories place much of the focus on LGBTQ, where they discuss sexuality of a particular gender. In queer studies, a person's gender is associated with non- heterosexuality and the life is different from what society expects. A prominent African- American cultural movement in the United States, known as the 'New Negro Movement,' is known as the Harlem Renaissance. The main focus of this movement is on issues related to race and African American traditions. Currently, there is a significant uprooting of gay literature. For instance, gay author Richard Bruce Nugent was active throughout the Harlem Renaissance. With regard to homophobia and the relationship between homosexuality and society, Oscar Wilde asserts the following:

"... the love that dare not speak its name." The only comments about it were expressions of fear and contempt, fear of contamination of self and society, and contempt for weak, unnatural perverts. Homosexuals were seen as threats to the family and the continuation of the species. (Qtd in Movement, 91)

This quotation shows how being in one's own identity or disclosing one's sexual orientation puts one in jeopardy. Wilde, on the other hand, suggests that society is not yet ready to embrace the queer.

One of the important incidents during James Baldwin's period was the Stone Wall Riots. The riot was a type of protest for freedom. Gay bars were common during that time, and some bars were only accessible to homosexuals. During this period, the police illegally entered and sexually assaulted, the homosexuals. The Stonewall Inn became a popular gay

bar in the middle of the 19th century. Homosexuality is viewed as an unlawful act at this time. The Gay Rights Movement, which took place in Greenwich Village in 1969, left a lasting impression in the minds of the gay people experienced humiliation in these pubs prior to liberation. It is believed that the Gay Liberation Movement was founded in Greenwich Village.

In another perspective, even after liberation, homosexuals and their lives affect deep inside and outside the society. The self-liberation to express or reveal identity without fear carries a question mark even today. In parallel with how Baldwin addresses racism, homosexuality-related issues have been brought up throughout his writings. He states in the interview "James Baldwin: The Last Interview" with Goldstein as,

The terrors homosexuals go through in this society would not be so great if the society itself did not go through so many terrors which it doesn't want to admit. The discovery of one's sexual preference doesn't have to be a trauma. It's trauma because it's such a traumatized society. (63)

Baldwin clearly shows that the trauma behind the queer people is the society, which treats them as outsiders and considers them as disconnected to the societal norm. On the other hand, he also implies that the dissociation of a homosexual is not by the sexuality and it is the society who fails to accept them as a part of one among them.

This article focuses on homophobia and the inner psychology of homosexuals.

Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* is based on the psychological perspective in relation to Freud's understanding of homosexuality. The title *Giovanni's Room* alludes to homosexuality because that is the room where the main characters, David and Giovanni, spend time together as gays. In this room, they explore and arouse their feelings for one another. Here the author explains their intimate relationship. The novel deals with the problems of sexual identity and self-realization. Being bisexual, the protagonist, David, experiences internal trauma in an effort to discover his sexual orientation. For instance, David professes his love for Giovanni while also being in love with Hella. Whereas the protagonist experiences homophobia while continuing his relationship with Giovanni and Hella. The protagonist's dilemma says that: I was already with Giovanni. I had asked her to marry me before she went away to Spain and, she laughed and I laughed but that, somehow, all the same, made it more serious for me and I persisted'; and then she said she would have to go away and think about it. (Room, 4)

This clearly highlights the protagonist's relationship with both sexes. On the other hand, the narration shows his interest in Hella. This statement of confession initially proves at the beginning of the novel that the protagonist is bisexual.

The entire text is written in the first person narration. Sexual minorities are represented in this novel, where the protagonist is in a dilemma over his sexuality. The protagonist, however, is ashamed of his sexuality. David, who is homosexual, rejects his sexuality. The author conveys his sexual orientation through the protagonist David, and he also describes his feelings for Joey, who has love at first-sight. He recalls his relationship with Joey: "We were walking along and Joey was making dirty wisecracks and we were laughing. Odd to remember, for the first time in so long, how good I felt that night, how fond of Joey" (6). This depicts David's sexuality and his desire for same-sex relationship. The mutual attraction between David and Joey is made clear as they both confess their affections for one another, which are thought to be mutual. Their attitude exemplifies how emotionally and physically connected the two characters.

On the other hand, homophobia is the fear of being open about one's sexual orientation in society. As the novel replicates Baldwin's part of life, Baldwin is seen as an outsider in American society because of his sexuality and race.

In *Giovanni's Room*, the protagonist gradually discovers the regrets of his sexual orientation, which shows a sign of homophobia. Another significant element in *Giovanni's Room* is his feelings of regret and shame. David, the main character, is ashamed while also having a fear of expressing his sexuality. The guilt-consciousness made him tremble, and he admitted his anxiety by stating,

I would have touched him to wake him up but something stopped me. I was suddenly afraid. Perhaps it was because he looked so innocent lying there, with such perfect trust; perhaps it was because he was so much smaller than me; my own body suddenly seemed gross crushing and desire which was rising in me seemed monstrous. (8)

This highlights that the protagonist expresses his anxiety about his sexuality, and his inner conscience makes him feel guilty about identifying himself as homosexual.

The internal conflict arises in David's mind as whether he should continue his relationship with Hella or with Giovanni and this cause fear of society. The homosexual lifestyle is not universally accepted. As a result, David decides to end his relationship with Giovanni and decides to pretend as a heterosexual male suffering from homophobia. The father of psychoanalysis, Freud, and his view on homosexuality is reflected in James Baldwin. He claims that the term "libido" refers to a person's physical sexual desires. Here, David can be considered a "libido". His sexual interests have changed between the sexes since his young-hood days. For instance, his longing and desire for Joey, Giovanni, and Hella, continue, and all these characters have intimate relationship with David.

Another factor that relates to the concept of homosexuality is life and death drive. In this instance, the 'life drive' interacts with id, or emotions. The pleasure principle represents the 'id'. David elaborates on the psychosexual stages

present in libidos. Oral, anal, latency, and genital phases have a connection to homosexuality, and they all relate to the characters in *Giovanni's Room*. Baldwin expresses openly the close bond between the characters David and Hella, David and Joey, and David and Giovanni. David resembles Baldwin in terms of gay. The journey of the David is a reflection of the Baldwin's own life. The phases relate to the characters David, Joe, and Giovanni; the oral and anal phases denote the signs of homosexuality. A triangular love is experienced among the characters. While David and Giovanni have feelings for one another, Jacques has feelings for David. "Jacques" is the epitome a gay.

Freud's views on homosexuality are often considered controversial. According to him, being homosexual is normal. On the other hand, he believes that sexual orientation happens through psychological factors rather than biological changes. There are two important biological and psychological factors that influence sexual orientation. Here is where sexual attraction begins. For instance, the same-sex attraction serves as the central theme in *Giovanni's Room*. Homosexuality is not accepted as a natural act in society. It was regarded as a mental illness during Baldwin's time. Freud, however, states that 'it is not a mental disorder'. The characteristics of sexuality and the impact of social and psychological factors influence sexual orientation. The term "sexual orientation" describes a person's sexual attraction and behavior. Sexual attraction is the key factor in "sexual orientation". The concept of divergence lies in sexual attraction and sexual orientation. i.e., sexual attraction refers to physical intimacy, and sexual orientation refers to individual identity towards sex. For instance, the main character David is identified as both homo and bisexual, and his preference for both sexes is viewed attractive. Sexual identity is defined as: "Sexual identity has also been used to refer to in sexuality (e.g., polyamorist, swinger, and "dom" or "sub" in bondage, discipline, and sadomasochism [BDSM])" (2-3).

Baldwin's, *Giovanni's Room* could be considered as a novel meant for psychological study where characters display excellent abnormality for the American Psychiatric Association, "Homosexuality is considered as a psychological disorder" (395). Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* is a story of complex structure for representing queerness, i.e., homosexuality and bisexuality. When *Giovanni's Room* was first published in 1956, both psychology and homosexuality were seen as mental diseases. The character David exhibits self-hatred. Instead of expressing or accepting his sexuality, he has guilt and fear about being homosexual, and this can be seen from a psychological perspective. It is evident from the novel that Baldwin is afraid of the society. Because of his culture, class, and gender, the protagonist experienced extreme difficulty in overcoming his sexual barriers. This novel could be considered autobiographical. Both Baldwin and his characters fight for identity throughout their lives. In his essay, "The Uses of the Blues" describes how he feels about guilt thus:

As long as you are guilty about something, no matter what it is, you are not compelled to change it. Guilt is like a warm bath or, to be rude, it is like masturbation: you can get used to it, you can prefer it, you may get to a place where you cannot live without it, because in order to live without it, in order to get past this guilt, you must act. (85-86)

This can be compared to the protagonist's guilt. His guilty consciousness made him suffer in a dilemma, and when he thinks of Giovanni psychologically, he feels depressed.

On the other hand, Baldwin's conflict over his sexual desire highlights the struggle of the David. For instance, while he was a soldier, he had a sexual attraction towards other soldiers. Later, David realises his mistake. This shows his relationships with many partners, including Joey, Giovanni, and a few more. He feels guilty once he realises that his behaviors are not acceptable to society. Once he is sexually attracted the psychological mind emerges and at this stage, his consciousness is superior to his intimacy rather than his social consciousness.

The protagonist chooses to identify himself as heteronormativity rather than homosexual as the story in this novel switches back and forth between the past and the present. He arrives at this decision because of his awareness of socially constructed norms. David departs from Giovanni without giving him any indication that their relationship is ending. Giovanni, on the other hand, feels betrayed and shows signs of suffering. The psychological emotion that transforms from pain to happiness is what David feels for Joey, as he states, "But out of this astounding intolerable pain came joy, we gave each other joy that night. It seemed, then, that a lifetime would not belong enough for me to act with Joey the act of love" (7). This statement connects the psychological behavior of a human, where he acts according to his feelings attached to the human psyche.

The main character, who has been identified as homosexual, strives to hide his sexuality throughout the story. As the novel progresses, David decides to be heterosexual, but he is unable to show priority for his own sex. As a result, he leaves Hella and accepts his sexuality in order to live with Giovanni's memories. Here, self-rejection and self-acceptance play a major role in gender queerness. The framing of gender identity is also regarded as a social and gender status. When individuals lose their socially constructed identity, they are forced into a marginalized state, rejected by neighbors and well-wishers.

Freud's theory of "Pleasure" and "Reality" principle fits into David's character.

David responds to the pleasure principle when he is unconscious, or “id”, and indulges into close connections unconsciously without thinking about consequences. His consciousness, or “ego”, or the reality principle, appears when he escapes from the id. In this state, he decides to follow reality rather than his irrational urges and strives to control them. The societal norms compels him to accept what the society instructs, which is represented by the reality principle “Ego” and the individual experiences trauma by hiding the individuality. David suffers from internal trauma that leads to homophobia. On the other hand, he makes efforts to live in the same way as that of heterosexual individuals and lead a life close to anybody else in the society. He is in a super conscious stage at this point, where he alerts himself to act in a socially acceptable way. This is the stage of ‘Superego’. Suppression of desire occurs in the individual when he has to comply with moral behaviour. Freud states that: “there is no doubt that the resistance of the conscious and unconscious ego operates under the sway of the pleasure principle: it seeks to avoid the unpleasure which would be produced by the liberation of the repressed” (20). Freud explicitly addresses the conscious and unconscious processes in function in relation to the human psyche. Controlling of emotions and desires take place in the conscious and super conscious stages.

Superego is the term used to describe the suppression of desires taking place at the conscious state of mind. At this stage, individuals become conscious of their guilt and find themselves in a dilemma. For instance, David’s conscious psyche makes him feel guilty about his attraction towards both sexes. The concept of “sublimation” is important in psychoanalytic theory. On the other side, Freud views sublimation as a sign of maturity.

Sublimation is a process of sexual instinct that dilutes the urge with the help of the superego. In *Giovanni’s Room*, the protagonist is trying to remain in a sublime manner. Freud believed that the ego (conscious level) served as a mediator between the id and the superego. The sublimation is an act of denial in which the protagonist, David refuses to keep his relationship with Giovanni. Homophobia renders people to act quite aggressively toward themselves.

Thus, this article focuses on the complexity of homophobia in the lives of LGBT people. The homosexuals person experience psychological trauma and struggle to embrace their identity, according to Freud’s theory of homosexuality. A significant revelation regarding LGBT people and the trauma they experience in their lives comes from Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*. Queer people often face threatening situations in American society for that matter across the global, which sometimes lead to death. In this novel, the viewpoint of family and society is also projected onto the lives of LGBT people, and their rejection of non-heteronormativity plunges those lives into despair.

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