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The Gloomy Vision in the 20th century American Fiction with special reference to Henry Miller, Norman Mailer and James Baldwin

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Abstract: *Before the disintegration of United Soviet Socialist Russia, the world was divided between two main groups- Capitalist and Socialist. The United States of America was the leader of the capitalist group, while the socialist group was led by Soviet Russia. Writers specially novelists were also divided into these two groups. They either supported capitalism or socialism directly or indirectly. Those that supported capitalism found faults with socialism and presented a dark picture of socialist pattern of society. Those that belonged to socialist group did just the opposite of what the supporters of capitalism did. But there was also a third group of novelists and there still exists this group. The novelists representing this group are equally critical of capitalism and socialism. They are also critical of religions and other institutions. They are anarchist and called 'Prophets of doom'. They are picaresque, filthy, obscene, incoherent, formless, outrageous, offensive, shocking and rambling. The Vision, they present, as gloomy in which there is no ray of hope. There is no possible way of redemption except death and destruction. They are apocalyptic. They do not suggest any solution to the problems that man faces in this world.*

Key Words: : Marxist, Existentialist, Nightmarish, Anarchist, Doom, Decadence, In coherent, Hallucinating.

Although there are various critical interpretations of Miller, Mailer and Baldwin's novels, no full length attempt to integrate the writers' diverse responses to the complex American situation has been made. The echoes of Marxist, existentialist nightmarish and anarchist thought in their novels are not cohered to explicate the "integrate vision found in their works-grounded on a significant reality of the American milieu."

This study is an attempt to explore the world of these novelists for what constitutes their gloomy vision of the society. An attempt has also been made to make it clear that Henry Miller, Norman Mailer and James Baldwin resemble one another in their various aspects."

Henry Miller, Norman Mailer and James Baldwin are among the leading American novelists of the 20th century. Their fame and popularity are widespread among the English reading public in all around the world. They have become universal in their choice of themes and subjects and in their treatment of them. Besides there is an affinity among these three novelists. In their hands, American novel is different from what it had been in the hands of the traditional fiction writers of the 20th Century. Henry Miller was born in the last decade of the 19th century and Mailer and Baldwin in the beginning of 20th century. They started writing when Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Steinbeck and Proust were in full swing. Following their traits they could also become the literary stars of their circle. But instead of following the traits of these popular masters of their period they delinked themselves with these masters and set their own trend. Their deep roots in the 19th century European writers separated them from other modern fiction writers of 20th century. In one way or the other they are all deeply influenced by Nietzsche and the nihilism. That is why they all have a gloomy vision of doom, decadence and of obscure which is very much prevalent in the modern American Society. They harp on the hollowness of the universe, the helplessness of man and the constant anguish of human situation on a large scale. They give the impression of something lacking in the system ideology and doctrine Though there may not be full coherence in their thinking, yet they certainly have a definite vision of life which is distinctly and deeply enshrined in their writings. They are egocentric and confessional, shocking, violent, obscene, rambling, incoherent, formless, anti socials, anarchic, solipsistic, mystical, hallucinating, nightmarish, ecstatic, and apocalyptic. They love America but hate the life as it is being lived there. They are against of all the social, moral and religions taboos and customs and consider them a hindrance in the free and full development of individuals whom they give the supreme importance."

Henry Miller -the pioneer and the trend setter:"

Henry Miller is certainly a different writer from the traditional writers of his time. According to George Wicker "Henry Miller is likely to outlast a great many writers who at the moment seem more important. Fifty years from now, a hundred years from now, he will remain a significant figure of our time..... for Henry Miller is not only a writer, he is a phenomenon..... His name is news and is bound to become history. He epitomizes a movement, a trend, perhaps a revolution in mores". He has gone to the extent of classing Miller with giants like "Rousseau" and "Byron" in respect of saying provocative and outrageous things."It is true that Miller has done in the domain of fiction what may be called outrageous because he is an audacious enough to break the barriers on pornography and play the role of a comedian, a clown, nay, a buffoon. It should



however, be borne in mind that Miller is also a noted public figure, He is a rebel, iconoclast, anti nomian, anarchist, anti-bourgeois, anti-white-Nordic protestant, anti-American, anti utopian and anti civilization and so on. He is also treated as a 'Patagonian', 'a literary gangster' and the first author of anti-literature. He is above every thing else a 'cultural hero' - or 'villain', to those who see him as a menace to law and order. He might even be described as a folk hero: hobo, prophet who draws the moral of amoral acceptance. "Deeply influenced by Nietzsche, Marx, Sterner, Dostoevsky and reinforced by the polemics of Emma Goldman, the most prominent spoke man of Anarchism in America, Miller developed a peculiar spirit of rebellion in him and his attitude bent towards the nihilistic approach of life. Miller is indebted to these thinkers in his struggle of self identity, in his advocacy of individual liberty, his criticism of all social, moral, religions and political institutions, his loathing of machines and industries and in his pleading of free sexual relationship. Besides, a strong acceptance of destruction is also found in Nietzsche, Goldman and in other anarchist. In this regard Miller is again indebted to these anarchists as the element of aggression and destruction occupies an important place in his feeling and thinking. Above all, his rebellion remained free of social and political movement, differentiated him from the other writers of his age and allowed him to develop a way unique to himself. All these factors furnished a base upon which Miller could build the structure of his gloomy thoughts, which was further more supported by the chaos and disorder, the lawlessness, the social and political injustice, the materialistic trend of life, the racial discrimination and the sexual exploitation which are rampant in American society. Like a confused man he finds no other way to come out of the maladroitness and cries in rage."

"In the bottom of my heart there was murder. I wanted to see America destroyed, razed from top to bottom. I wanted to see this happen purely out of vengeance, as atonement for the crimes that were committed against me and against others like me who have never been able to lift their voices and express their hatred, their rebellion, their legitimate blood lust" (Tropic of Capricorn P. No. 12). He criticises the American labour system because it is based on exploitation. "I was up against the whole rotten system of American labour, which is rotten at both ends.... In fact, everybody was being exploited-the president and his gang by the unseen powers, the employees by the officials, and so on and around, in and out and through the whole works." (Capricorn P. No. 19)"

He is baffled to see the chaos and disorder of the society "I was walking around in a stone forest the centre of which was chaos; sometimes in the dead centre, in the very heart of chaos, I danced or drank myself silly, or I made love, or I befriended someone, or I planned a new life, but it was all chaos, all stone, and all helpless and bewildering". "In his description of sexual episodes Miller breaks the barriers on pornography and gives a frank and open description of sex, which prior to "Cancer" was unknown to sophisticated readers."

Norman Mailer: "The second writer chosen for the present study is Norman Mailer. He is also among the leading American writers writing in 20th century. Mailer is neither a plagiarist of Hemming way, Fitzgerald and Dreiser nor a copyist of Miller. He has his own vision of life. But in comparison of the traditional fiction writers like Hemingway and others he seems to be an inheritor of Miller's traits to a large extent. He is indebted to Miller in his expressing nihilism as an individual way of being, in criticising the American way of life, in his attacking the totalitarianism of American politics and in his protest against the socio-economic injustice. Like other contemporary novelists Mailer also shows that in American fiction sex, power and money are the three important modes of experience through which the self is tested against the conspiracies of the degenerating forces of nature, society, and of man's own tendencies for perversion. Mailer expresses himself in terms of violence, sex, growth and decay, through which he develops his unique contemporary and authentic vision with its central focus on the quest for freedom of the integrated and genuine self. His political ideas have a leftist orientation and his social thoughts derive from the organic conception of society. Mailer's views on man, society and God reveal that he developed a mature and fairly cogent social vision."

Mailer's novel *The Naked and the Dead* as a thesis novel aesthetically executed by a radical imagination. The novel depicts the disintegration of American society the resurgence of a native brand of nascent fascism and the bankruptcy of conventional liberal solutions. It expresses in its biopsy of American society various malignancies- exploitative capitalism, racism, social insecurity and inequality sexism religious bigotry, and a plethora of sexual disorders- by using the army as a microcosm of American society. Its alternatives to the stultifying effect of such a "sick" society are offered in terms of individual experience and moral categories. Employing the "beast seer" dichotomy in man, it concedes ample freedom of will to the individual to seek his own salvation in which are implicit its "yearnings for a better future". "Mailer's *Barbary Shore* is a political pathological report on the modern spirit. Mailer creates in it the nightmarish world of man's reversion to barbarism in the wake of totalitarian take over. The novel is not an "epitaph on Communism" for it traces much of the contemporary



malaise to the failure of the Russian Revolution to spread to Europe and the rise to power of Stalinist "hecks" in Russia. It does not however idealize ideology for its own sake, but underlines the moral calibre of its advocates. "Mailer's novel *The Deer Park* is a moral fable. The cross corruption, the commercialization of sex, the hedonistic obsessions and the general degradation of life which Mailer sees in Hollywood are a reflection of the moral state of the nation. The novel depicts the insidious workings of totalitarian forces in the world of films where the profit motive and the pleasure principle brutalize men and women alike. It posits courage and constant growth as a viable ethic for the individual caught with in the nexus of repression, violence and defeat, and further reveals that artistic creation requires the same process of growth that life and authenticity demand. "In *An American Dream* Mailer is again concerned with the themes that inform the essays and earlier fiction... Sex, Power, Violence, Danger and Death. In this novel Mailer presents his statement of hope for salvation in the realm of sexual love. "In *Why are We in Vietnam?* Mailer continues his exploration into the mystery and source of power trying to find the intersection point where the pure moral force of non human nature enters into or works through the human agencies of society. It communicates with unusual vividness something what it is like to be a vexed and struggling consciousness in contemporary America. The novel is about a certain death in the national soul of which Vietnam is a great symptom. "Mailer's criticism of America is also strident, offense and outrageous. It has been powered more by his moralistic fervor than by any political or social theory that could conveniently be categorized. He conceives human history as an affair of great clashing contraries, as an infuriate struggle between the Legions of Light and the Hosts of Darkness. He translates the events and issues of the day into metaphors that have long since dominated his mind and his work technology, fascism, dialectics, apocalypse, Being, cancer, obscenity, dread, courage, existentialism, violence, "totalitarianism, orgy, God and the devil, sex, power and time. All these social and political malignancies contribute a lot to the gloomy vision of Mailer and the impression that a reader gets after reading his works is that the future of mankind is not bright under such circumstances."

James Baldwin: "The third writer chosen for the present study is James Baldwin. James Baldwin is not only a great Black - American essayist, he is also among the leading American novelists writing in the last century. With the exception of *Giovanni's Room*, his fiction contains Black characters trying to survive in an overwhelmingly white society. In addition to his anguished concern for the Black condition and his emphasis on the problem of both Black and American, Baldwin has a novel and illuminating way of treating such universal themes and subjects as human sexuality and identity, love, hate, fear, guilt, shame, pain, isolation and alienation. So it may be said that his ultimate concern is humanity, and thus the problems of Blacks becomes inevitably the problems of man and of mankind regardless of colour and race, or of the differences of culture and religion." Baldwin himself states: "As a writer, you have to decide that what is really important is not that the people you write about are Negroes, but that they are people, and that the suffering of any person is really universal."

Religion, Colour, and Sexuality are used in Baldwin's fiction to shed light upon the perennial issues of men. The fact that he also dares to break some barriers and overthrow certain taboos by making explicit statements on such delicate subjects as homosexuality and incest, should be regarded in his favour. For, by doing so he not only exposes himself and relieves his suffering as an outcast in more than one sense, but he also provides the readers with fresh glimpses of important social phenomena. He seems to say that in order to know himself, man must face his nature and his identity- his "self" in its totality, however unpleasant and painful this may be for him, only then can men have the right to hope to attain harmony both within and without. "Baldwin avoids simplified judgements, pronouncement, and statements as any of his novels will demonstrate. Every aspect of man, and of his relationship with other men and God is made to reflect the complexity of man's nature as a whole. Like Miller and Mailer, Baldwin's novels are thus woven around such tremendously complicated issues as religion, identity, love, hate, and pain, bisexuality, homosexually, heterosexuality, incest, and humanity. "Baldwin's novels '*Just Above My Head*' is a penetrating protest against the dehumanization of man; against dehumanization of man by man through apathy, obtuseness, and blind excommunication, against dehumanization by cruel racist and sexual discrimination, degradation, and conviction. Baldwin shows that such prejudices succeed in making man ultimately ashamed not of his color and sexual urges, which he has no means of changing, and no desire to change, but of his humanity In technique and language Baldwin is deeply influenced by Henry Miller. Like Henry Miller, Baldwin also eptomizes the trend of using a number of slangs in his novels. For, he believes that the "word" - the language is an in adequate medium for reflecting the true nature, the subtlety and the dimensions of man's predicament. Hemade us aware of how misleading, indeed how meaningless, these terms may be when stripped of their context. Baldwin's forceful, if some what bitter statement seems to imply that though these appellations were invented for convenience sake, they have come to be regarded as complete explanations. Like Miller's '*Tropic of Cancer*' the story of *Just Above My Head* is also told in first person. "The novel moves across three decades, from late 1940's to late



1970's. The central figure, Arthur, is a homosexual gospel singer who has died of a heart attack in a London Pub at the very beginning of the book. Like Miller Baldwin is also obscene and outrageous. He is rather ahead of Miller and describes such issues as homosexuality, bisexuality and incest. Homosexuality according to Baldwin, is one of the paths in the search of one's true identity. He is of the view that man has to confront the evils within himself and within the society, not necessarily through religion or through some moral and social systems, but also through love in one or more of the forms it may like-Each individual has a world of conflicting forces with which he must become acquaintance. The acquaintance is often carried out "through the help of an initiated person, in order to direct them for the positive growth of himself and other...." This is what Baldwin means by identity. But again in 'Just Above My Head' his characters are troubled by their conscience which is formed by puritanical morality of fear, guilt, and corruption. When Arthur meets people whom he suspects of knowing his secret, he feels ashamed, debased, "violated", stripped, naked, spat on". He is ashamed of the "Contempt and Complicity" in their eyes, which fills him with a feeling of hatred towards him. Baldwin believes that for the achievement of self identity as a human being, conventional moral traditions become a serious hindrance when they are used as a means of condemning, ostracizing, and persecuting those who do not conform to the conventions even though they do not harm to the society. When such individuals are rejected by others and denied their freedom they also reject themselves and fail to come to a full understanding and realization of themselves as human beings."

The ultimate truth, as it emerges from Baldwin's fiction, seems to be that there is no reconciliation in life whatsoever. The root cause of all these evils is the capitalistic pattern of society which is based on all sorts of exploitations. The greed for money and power has made man degraded, immoral and selfish. There is no harmony between the individual and the society. Hence there is chaos and disorder, gloom and despair in the society and a clandestine and ambiguous desire of getting rid of all these evils." Hence in the light of what has been stated above and earlier, it becomes crystal clear that there is an ample evidence of this note of despair and gloominess in the writings of H. Miller, Norman Mailer and James Baldwin and there is also Hence in the light of what has been stated above and earlier, it becomes crystal clear that there is an ample evidence of this note of despair and gloominess in the writings of H. Miller, Norman Mailer and James Baldwin and there is also a note of protest against the evils of society. The Negro in American Culture" in The Black American writer, ed. C.W.E. Birgstry, vol. 1 (Baltecnore: Penguin Books, 1969), P.80,5.

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