

## Examining Arguments of James Baldwin's Critique of Protest Literature

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James Baldwin is a magnate name of the African American literature. He is often couched as the titan spokesperson of the Black community in America. He ferociously used his pen to argue and criticize the racial bigotry that grips American society and polity. His arguments and views are still deemed notably worthy in both literary and political world and are often quoted by contemporary artists, writers, activists, and politicians. He authored several books and published essays on a wide range of subjects throughout his literary life. Baldwin enunciated and sustained various protests through his realistic literature – both fictional and non-fictional. However, he ardently refused to be named as a ‘protest literature author.’ He has repeatedly repudiated this title along with several others like ‘spokesman of the Black Community.’ He vehemently refused to accept social protest novels as an appropriate literary genre. He loudly vocalized his opinions in his one of the first and intensely polemical essay

“*Everybody's Protest Literature*.” It was first published in the year 1949 and then reappeared in his collection of essays titled “*Notes of a Native Son*” in 1955.

Baldwin offered a comprehensive and intricate critique of protest novels specifically focusing on two pioneering social protest novels of American literary history. He launches a staunch enquiry on Harriet Beecher Stowe's ground-breaking novel about slavery titled “*Uncle Tom's Cabin*” and Richard Wright's renowned novel named “*Native Son*.” Baldwin shared an intimate relationship with both the literary pieces. He introduced this to his readers at the beginning of “*Notes of Native Son*.” He deliberately informed that he like many black

community young individuals grew up reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* repeatedly. This can also be interpreted as Baldwin's attempt to highlight the psychological impacts caused by the wide readership of Stowe's novel. Baldwin held high reverence for Wright as a mentor. This friendship nonetheless ruptured after the publication of Baldwin's essay. An exchange between Wright and Baldwin clearly depicts this. Richard Wright told Baldwin that "All literature is protest. You can't name a single novel that isn't protest," and Baldwin replied that "all literature might be protest but all protest was not literature" ("Nobody Knows My Name" 157).

This essay aims to analyse Baldwin's critique of protest literature and explore a balanced understanding. James' arguments are neither refuted, nor accepted wholly, rather an investigation of their intensity, assumed origin and counter agreement has been undertaken. A wide range of sources have been used and examined to evaluate the relevance of Baldwin's critique of protest literature as a genre. The essay culminates by directing the study of protest literature to a new scope.

Baldwin's foremost critique of protest novels was rooted in his vigorous rejection of the genre of protest literature. He considered that protest literature merges sociology, political ideologies, and literature into one frame which is a poor prospect. This affects the literary credibility of the literature written by and for the Black community. He strongly denounced the sociological motive of protest literature and disapproved of the merging of sociology and literature. He writes "it argues an insuperable confusion, since literature and sociology are not one and the same; it is impossible to discuss them as if they were" ("Everybody's Protest Novel" 11). He considered it to be a force which categorized African American literature as simply an ideologically driven art deprived of literary aesthetics.

He expounded that the term ‘protest literature’ is itself contestable in terms of its ambition. He claimed that authors of protest literature make conscious efforts in cataloguing the violence upon the Black community to achieve the greater aim of creating social awareness. Nonetheless, in this process, they thrust literary violence in the use of their language and methods of representation of characters and plot, which is often overlooked. He further argued on the same front that “They (protest literature) are forgiven, on the strength of the(se) good intentions, (irrespective) whatever violence they do to language, whatever excessive demands they make of credibility...One is told to put first things first, the good of society coming before niceties of style or characterization” (11). He followingly questioned about this “good of the society” and called out for the person, authority or the institutions which specify the good and bad of the American public. James pronounced that the mist of the protest literature’s aim to “bring greater freedom to the oppressed” (13) hides that “these books are both badly written and widely improbable” (13).

This viewpoint of Baldwin can be traced to his leftist past and acknowledging the influence of Trotsky’s conception of literature and politics on him. Baldwin shifted from Harlem to Greenwich village around the year 1943. Baldwin waited tables at a small restaurant named ‘The Calypso’. It was a significant hangout place for several musicians, actors, and political radicals. Baldwin’s introduction to the left is supposedly believed to begin at this place

where he encountered Trotskyite and Marxist intellectuals like Alain Locke and Claude McKay. This leftist introduction was enhanced during Baldwin attendance at DeWitt Clinton High School. Max Shactman who was a prominent leader of the American Trotskyist movement formed the alumni hub of this school. Baldwin was then shortly commissioned for *The Nation* and *New Leader*. James Campbell observed in *Talking at the Gates*, that it was

“surprising to find young Negro with no formal education beyond the age of seventeen contributing regularly to the nation’s top intellectual circles” (Campbell 21). Therefore, Baldwin’s writing published in both leftist journals inextricably confirm his leftist links.

This furthered Baldwin into the circle of “The New York intellectuals”, most of whom were significantly impressed by views of Trotsky on art and politics. Baldwin critic of protest literature finds resonances with Trotsky’s view on “limitation of eliding ideology with aesthetics” (Trotsky 144). Trotsky in his book “*Literature and Revolution*” announced that social and political content should not outweigh the style of writing while evaluating the literary work. He mentioned that “It is not true, that we regard only that art as new and revolutionary that speaks of the worker, and it is nonsense to say that we demand that the poets should describe inevitably a factory chimney, or the uprising against capital” (Trotsky 145). Geraldine

Murphy has identified the resemblance between Trotsky and Baldwin. He wrote that, “[Baldwin] his early publication engage with the political and literary shortcomings of proletarian and Popular Front literature... structured by a language characteristic of the Left” (Murphy).

Though Baldwin’s outlook is fortified by several other critics, it is an arguable proposition. Protest literature is a fluid term used largely for different and divergent forms of literature. It is very childish to denounce the term which monumentally accommodates numerous forms and is perceived by every individual differently depending on their backgrounds. This reflects the subjective nature of the genre. John Stauffer wrote in the book *American’s Protest Literature* that “there was no common understanding of protest literature; the term has been used to mean virtually all literature or no literature” (Trode 12).

Hence, it is realistically impossible to cover American protest literature under one umbrella.

Therefore, James' abhorrence of the whole genre seems immature.

Irving Howe hoisted a fervent commentary of Baldwin after his essay was published. Irving stalwartly praised Wright's book *Native Son*. On the issue of sociology and literature, he acutely countered Baldwin by writing in his essay "*Black Boys and Native Sons*" that "Baldwin's formula evades, through rhetorical sweep, the genuinely difficult issue of the relationship between social experience and literature" (Howe 2). Howe connects this to the background of Wright and how "his sociology of existence" (2) surfaces the "pain and ferocity" in his literary work. This ironically also resonates with the argument about the influence of the writer's background in every literary work that is produced, made by Baldwin in his essay. He announces that Baldwin is not the first American Negro who wages a war between a writer's artistic and social responsibilities and consider them irreconcilable. Nevertheless, with respect to the literary language and the accused violence that characterized protest novels, Howe sharply noted that:

"James Baldwin's early essays are superbly eloquent, displaying virtually in full the gifts that would enable him to become one of the great American rhetoricians. But these essays, like some of the later ones, are marred by rifts in logic, so little noticed when one gets swept away by the brilliance of the language that it takes a special effort to attend their argument" (2).

African American literature has significantly reflected different genres with the underlying consciousness to surface the hypocrisies in American social and political fabric. Slave narratives - an undeniably famous genre of African- American literature is also connotated as protest literature by multiple critics. Zoe Trodd writes that "abolition runs through American protest literature...where the myths and text of America's beginnings had gaps, protest literature stepped in, offering ways to correct sins and omissions" (Trodd 25). Though as Stauffer mentions that protest literature should ideally consist of three elements –

“empathy, shock value and symbolic action” (Trodd 14), it is not the compulsory requirements. Ergo, it will be irresponsible to accept one-sided approach of Baldwin with regards to the Protest literature as a genre.

The other important aspect to consider here is the desired outcome of the protest novel or to simply put, the extend of social awareness and change that any protest novel was able to create. James may be highly accurate in his critique about the overlooking of literary performance whilst critics focus on the social cause of the protest literature. Nonetheless, it should also be understood that the primary aim of most of the protest literature is not to achieve literary excellence but to act as “catalyst, guide, or mirror of social change” (Trodd 12). This renders James argument about Stowe’s novel being a “bad fiction” (“Everybody’s Protest

Novel”<sup>11</sup>) insignificant because *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* fulfils its goals. James himself acknowledged that Stowe’s goal is to expose the horrors of slavery. Therefore, if readers were convinced that slavery is indeed horrible and the novel acted as an upfront narrative during the Civil War of America, Stowe has achieved her desired outcome. Therefore, Baldwin’s disdain of her work cannot be comprehended entirely right.

Stowe’s novel continues to be widely read and undeniably popular work in the American protest literature. In an article in the Guardian newspaper in the year 2015, the editor wrote that “If you want a heart-wrenching book that explores one of the greatest evils of humanity, whilst still retaining a small piece of hope for change, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is for you” (“*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*”). Nevertheless, it evokes another debate about the issue of sentimentality in the genre of protest literature.

James bluntly detested Harriet's novel as a bad fiction with "self-righteous, virtuous sentimentality" ("Everybody's Protest Novel" 11). He annotated this as the extended critique of the writing style of authors of protest novel. James demanded that readers should carefully examine the protest literature outside of these sentiments, otherwise protest literature become a mere testimony of violence. Baldwin stated that if protest novels are analysed through the literary lens, they make very little contributions. This is well-supported by J.W. Ward who wrote in respect to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that "For the literary critic, the problem [with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*] is how a book so seemingly artless, so lacking in literary talent, was not only an immediate success but has endured"(Ward 24) among common readers. This also seconded the abovementioned critique of James of protest novels. The sentimentality which James pointed out then actually becomes protest novel's reason for success rather than the literary excellence.

This "ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion" ("Everybody's Protest Novel" 10) to involve readers emotionally undercovers the root of the social problem. This James recalled as good content for a pamphlet but not good enough for a novel. Hence, he referred to Stowe as "an impassioned pamphleteer" (11) rather than a good novelist. James blatantly accused Stowe that she overtly displayed sentiments to conceal the relevant gaps of her novel. Though with courageous language, she most successfully documented the sufferings but failed to question the reasons behind it. She remained profusely ignorant of the intentions and power dynamics which invoked the sufferings that she cites in her novel. In her fight against slavery, she utterly dismissed the question of accountability. Baldwin simply put this in his essay:

"the nature of Mrs. Stowe's subject matter, her laudable determination to flinch from nothing in presenting the complete picture; an explanation which falters only if we pause to

ask whether or not her picture is indeed complete; and what constriction or failure of perception forced her to so depend on the description of brutality—unmotivated, senseless—and to leave unanswered and unnoticed the only important question: what it was, after all, that moved her people to such deeds” (13).

He elucidated that to set the evocative mood in protest novels, writers fail to delve in history to understand the reality. He accused writers of making no serious attempt to go beyond the surfaced condition and concretely deal with the critical elements that frame the nation’s history and the current crisis. This evades protest novel of the anthropological and historical situations.

However, opposing thoughts appear here. Firstly, in defence of the Stowe’s sentimentality, Jane Tompkins’ offer a sharp diverging viewpoint against Baldwin. She accepts that undoubtedly *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a highly sentimental abolitionist novel. She considers this as the strongest pillar of the book which ensured the fulfilment of Stowe’s purpose of writing the book. She writes in her essay that the emotional power possessed by the book forms a formidable and eye-catching emotional image in the minds of readers. This image urges them to connect and stand up against the horrors of Slavery.

Secondly, the sentimentality which Baldwin considered a paramount loophole in Stowe’s work can also be interpreted as a driving force used by the author to provoke readers to question the social and political life of America. Jane describes the novel as the “epitome of sentimentality” (Tompkins 126) which also remained a prominent literary guide in the American Civil War. The novel gained immense popularity because it emotionally connected the cause of slavery with its readers and therefore, its literary value as protest literature should be estimated through its vivid influence on readers. Baldwin critique, therefore, partly falls short when he only addressed Stowe’s novel as a mere document of violence with minimal



praiseworthy literary quality and overlooked its contribution to stir public debates about slavery.

James also accounted Wright's book "*Native Son*" for this fault of protest writing. He denounced it as an outburst of Wright's emotions and anger. He wrote that "We cannot, to begin with, divorce this book from the specific social climate of that time: it was one of the last of those angry productions, encountered in the late twenties and all through the thirties, dealing with the inequities of the social structure of America" (Many Thousands Gone 19).

Baldwin claimed that an extensive display of emotions undermined the creditability of *Native Son* as an authentic narration of racial discrimination. It made it driven by individual biases rather than a representation of social cause. Baldwin refuted this personalization that incurs in the writing of protest novels. This readily reduces them to fantasy fiction. His thought is also shared by Narendar Mohan who wrote in his article that:

"The moment protest is taken to mean simply emotional outburst, it loses its validity as modern literary expression and also as a weapon of social resurrection. For creative literary expression of protest, it is essential that protest is brought out of the domain of sentimentality into the purview of thought processes so that it becomes valid and robust in its range, temper and meaning. Protest cannot serve the important purposes of a dialogue or of social change unless it is brought out of the mire of nervous tension or romanticism. No doubt, it is through thought processes that passion for protest can be contained and rendered capable of artistic expression. (Mohan 4)

Baldwin stated that sentimentality tides the protest novel away from the reality of racism and supplant it with fantasies. James wrote that "They [protest novels] emerge for what they are: a mirror of our confusion, dishonesty, panic, trapped and immobilized in the sunlit prison of the American dream. They are fantasies, connecting nowhere with reality,

sentimental; in exactly the same sense that such movies as *The Best Years of Our Lives* or the works of Mr.

James M. Cain are fantasies” (“Everybody Protest Novel” 14). They simplify the moral life of the American society and conceals the acute representation of racism. James concluded that protest novels failed to connect race and racism. They do not attempt to scratch the imageries of dark and light and creates a world where the Black community is capable of Salvation either through their benevolent white saviours or extreme violence. He wrote in the very beginning that “Neither of them questions the medieval morality from which their dialogue springs: black, white, the devil, the next world—posing its alternatives between heaven and the flames—were realities for them as, of course, they were for their creator”(10)

Secondly, James questioned the representation of collective life of black communities in the novels. He claimed that protest novels are highly alienated from the real south side of America. They tend to present a one-sided view framed through the author’s psychological understanding. This personal vision is either shaped by the author’s own life or through the limited interaction with corporeal Black society. James inflicted a stronger critique of Wright in this regard. He elucidated that Wright demonstrated misery of the black urban neighbourhood is very one-sighted. He believed that in the conscious efforts of Wright to use his work to depicts the hardships of people of the South, he estranged the black individual from his community ties. James penned that:

“It is this which creates its climate of anarchy and unmotivated and unapprehended disaster; and it is this climate, common to most Negro protest novels, which has led us all to believe that in Negro life there exists no tradition, no field of manners, no possibility of ritual or intercourse, such as may, for example, sustain the Jew even after he has left his father’s house. But the fact is not that the Negro has no tradition but that there has as yet arrived no

sensibility sufficiently profound and tough to make this tradition articulate” (“Many Thousands Gone” 23). James professed that this alienation denies the complexity of racism and stride it away from reality. He profoundly wrote about Richard that:

“Recording his days of anger he has also nevertheless recorded, as no Negro before him had ever done, that fantasy Americans hold in their minds when they speak of the Negro: that fantastic and fearful image which we have lived with since the first slave fell beneath the lash.

This is the significance of *Native Son* and also, unhappily, its overwhelming limitations” (*Many Thousands Gone* 21).

Ralph Ellison seconded this opinion of Baldwin. He wrote that “I feel that *Native Son* is one of the major literary events in the history of American literature. I can say this even though at this point I have certain reservations about its view of reality.” (“Remembering Wright” 674) He focused on Wright’s neglect of rich black community life and pitting all the black individuals against each other in his book. He claimed that when Wright crafted all his black characters as potential threats to each other, he undermined the most vital strength of Black community i.e. the collective belongingness shared within Black neighbourhoods to endure and fight against racism.

He wrote extensively about the environment in Harlem where everyone helped and looked out for each other. He exclaimed that in the face of loneliness and hardship, community creativity flourished in the Black community. He also mentioned that Wright’s notion of freedom and the path to attain it is faulty and not practised by the multitudinous Black population. He states that “their resistance to provocation, their coolness under pressure, their sense of timing, and their tenacious hold on the ideal of their ultimate freedom” (“Stern Discipline” 76). Ellison precisely reprimanded Wright by stating that “I rejected

Bigger Thomas as any final image of Negro personality... are at least as characteristic of American Negroes as the hatred, fear and vindictiveness which Wright chose to emphasize” (81). Baldwin enriched his criticism by following that this escapism from reality evades the protest novels of their ultimate aim. He mentioned that this penetrated a false sense of moral victory in the readers whereby, they are under the impression of understanding intricacies of racism. He claims that reading protest literature automatically settles all the questions. A reader is given a choice between right and wrong and finding themselves at the right side, readers are given the consolation of morality. However, this victory is fallacious because it is utterly disconnected from reality.

The protest novels thus, denies human complexity, strengthening the categorization by giving life to American fantasies about the Blacks. Therefore, Wright’s work like other protest novels feeds into the imagined stereotypes about the Black community. They fail to communicate the realities and their stories and characterizations fuels the savage image which justified slavery. James wrote:

“To present Bigger as a warning is simply to reinforce the American guilt and fear concerning him, it is most forcefully to limit him to that previously mentioned social arena in which he has no human validity, it is simply to condemn him to death. For he has always been a warning, he represents the evil, the sin and suffering which we are compelled to reject” (“Many Thousands Gone” 24) Baldwin announces this as the biggest failure of protest novels. James concluded his essay by writing that:

“For Bigger’s tragedy is not that he is cold or black or hungry, not even that he is American, black; but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth. But our humanity is our burden,

our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult—that is, accept it. The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended” (“Everybody’s Protest Novel” 16).

On the contrary, Irving Howe in his essay considered Wright’s novel as immensely realistic fiction. He assuredly mentions that Wright is the foremost courageous writer who channelized the anger of the Black community and documents the restricted choices of Black individuals. He wrote that “In all its crudeness, melodrama and claustrophobia of vision, Richard Wright’s novel brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture” (Howe 4). He understands that Baldwin’s critique arose out of his own insecurities. He accuses Baldwin of trying to dissociate from his blackness which he believed to grip him into the social and literal ghettos. This is claimed to be true of many young black writers. Baldwin formulated his critique as it was: “fashionable in America during the post-war years. Mimicking the Freudian corrosion of motives and bristling with dialectical agility, this criticism approached all ideal claims, especially those made by radical and naturalist writers, with a weary skepticism and proceeded to transfer the values such writers were attacking to the perspective from which they attacked” (7).

Howe thus, questioned Baldwin’s own standing in the literary world, thereby, concluding that Baldwin refused to acknowledge that Wright’s anger is a reality because he focused primarily on what reality ought to be and rather what it was. He foresaw a rational man and therefore, discards Wright’s *Bigger*.

Baldwin also raised serious concerns about the stereotyping of characters in both Stowe’s and Wright’s novel. He considered that these characters exemplify the barbarous,

savage, and violent images of Black individuals. He presented two distinctive arguments in this regard. He criticized Stowe for crafting her character with black skin and white souls. He pronounced that Stowe's depicted Uncle Tom as the helpless, self-sacrificing, and enduring black man whose salvation was only ensured through his white masters. He wrote that "His triumph is metaphysical, unearthly; since he is black, born without the light, it is only through humility" ("Everybody's Protest Novel 13). This reductive view of Black Lives is characterized by protest novels which rob black people of their true identity and they are considerably dehumanized. Baldwin, however, did not criticize Stowe because she was white, he also launched the same investigation in the Wright's character 'Bigger Thomas'.

Baldwin alleged that by creating the violent character of Bigger Thomas, Wright betrayed his community. Though Wright did not draft this deliberately, he fills the white man's lie of Blacks being raging, savage and mechanical zombies. The absence of complexity in Bigger's and Tom's character romanticizes the issue of racism. James denounces Bigger as a distorted Black character as "Bigger has no discernible relationship to himself, to his own life, to his own people, nor to any other people—in this respect, perhaps, he is most American—and his force comes, not from his significance as a social (or anti-social) unit, but from his significance as the incarnation of a myth" ("Many Thousands Gone" 21).

Although Wright has heavily separated himself from Stowe in his autobiography title "Black Boys", James saw Bigger as the successor of Uncle Tom. He is a violent depiction of the Black individual who is so raged by the atrocities that he burns in the fire of hatred and anger directed towards the white community. This Baldwin recounts as the root cause behind the Iron curtain that has fallen between the Black and White community leaving no scope for mutual upliftment. James should be quoted at length to express this:

“All of Bigger’s life is controlled, defined by his hatred and his fear. And later, his fear drives him to murder and his hatred to rape; he dies, having come, through this violence, we are told, for the first time, to a kind of life, having for the first time redeemed his manhood. Below the surface of this novel, there lies, as it seems to me, a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy. Bigger is Uncle Tom’s descendant, the flesh of his flesh, so exactly opposite a portrait that, when the books are placed together, it seems that the contemporary Negro novelist and the dead New England woman are locked together in a deadly, timeless battle; the one uttering merciless exhortations, the other shouting curses. And, indeed, within this web of lust and fury, black and white can only thrust and counterthrust, long for each other’s slow, exquisite death; death by torture, acid, knives and burning; the thrust, the counter-thrust, the longing making the heavier that cloud which blinds and suffocates them both, so that they go down into the pit together” (“Everybody’s Protest Novel 15).

Baldwin’s arguments have found spaces in the twenty-first century, though they have been amply scrutinized. Eldridge Cleaver appeared as the heir of Howe to base Baldwin’s critique of protest literature as his “own psychological malady” (Cleaver 99). Cleaver in his collection of essays titled “*Soul on Ice*” has expansively testified that Black community identifies vastly with Bigger’s character. He dissected Bigger’s character as “a man in violent, though inept, rebellion against the stifling, murderous, totalitarian white world” (106). This brings back the Ellison’s comment about the success of Wright’s novel is making its character relatable to Black Americans irrespective of its clumsy literary craftsmanship.

It can then be concluded that both the novels examined by Baldwin to exemplify his critique of protest literature have considerable literary standing in scholarly world. Though, there appears several major loopholes in their representation of the Black community and

their literary ethics, they are eminently celebrated for their own distinctive qualities. Secondly, Baldwin's critique is not entirely sufficient as it clubs only two novels as representation of humongous genre of protest literature. Thirdly, Baldwin's conflict with Wright accentuates the debate surrounding protest literature to the intentions and values of the writer. There is a conspicuous difference in their experience of inevitable emotion of rage they encounter being the Black writer. Wright pens his anger in his fiction, whereas Baldwin uses it as tool to analyse the causes of that anger. Hence, protest literature can take multiple shapes and remain faithful to its objective to casting lights on social evils. A study should be instigated in the direction of understanding and challenging the connotations attached to the term protest literature. American literary tradition has effectively accommodated protest culture in it. Both white and black writers have inculcated overriding themes of social protest in their writings. Somehow though, protest literature as a term is only associated with African American writings. This leads to extensive disagreement regarding its use in the Black writers. The restrictive use of term turns it into literary innuendo and thus, critics like Baldwin boldly denounce it. This term has been used to brush aside the issues raised in social literature and defeat their purpose by deducing them as literary fallacies. Hoyt. W. Fuller also enunciates this in his essay:

"Negro literature is dismissed as "protest literature "because, if it deals honestly with Negro life, it will be accusatory toward white people, and nobody likes to be accused, especially of crimes against the human spirit. The reading public must realize, then, that while it is the duty of any serious writer to look critically and truthfully at the society of which he is a part, and to reveal that society to itself, the Negro writer, by virtue of his identification with a group deliberately held on the outer edges of that society, will, if he is honest, call attention to that special aspect of the society's failure" (Fuller). Therefore, the essay concludes that Baldwin's





commentary on protest literature should be taken as constructive knowledge to improve the literary style of the upcoming social protest novels rather than a blatant forsake of genre of protest literature.

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