

# Autobiographical Elements and Racial Trauma in James Baldwin's Novel 'Go and tell it on the Mountain'

Dr. Kanwar Pal Singh\*

Assistant Professor and Head, Department of English, Mihir Bhoj P.G. College, Dadri, G.B. Nagar

**Abstract** – The present paper deals with Baldwin's debut novel 'Go Tell It On the Mountain' with a view point of autobiographical elements and racial trauma pertaining to the dull insight of Christianity, racial and gender discrimination which he experienced in his own life. The novel is filled with Baldwin's feelings and emotions inked with the very tongue spoken by the dim American. A deep study of the novel reveals that it is a complex story interwoven with the stories of John, the protagonist's mother, fathers and aunts with its focus on the role of religion, race and gender in their lives at Harlem ghetto where a number of black people including the protagonist in novel and Baldwin in reality, migrated from the southern part of the US for a better future but in reality it has been proved an illusion because religious minority (the black people) are pushed to the margin by the majority community (the white people) who treated the black people as animals, second citizens and objects to be beaten, raped and killed in the broad light of the day.

**Keywords** – Negro, Harlem Ghetto, Marginalization, Autobiographical, Religion, Racism.

-----X-----

## INTRODUCTION

James Arthur Baldwin (1924-1987) is respected as a renowned American novelist, playwright, essayist, poet, social critic and activist. His first novel, *Go Tell It On The Mountain* (1953), is a speaking picture of racial, sexual and gender discrimination in the later part of 20<sup>th</sup> century in US. It is an incredible record of the dull atmosphere and the emotional strain of the Negroes including the author in the Harlem ghetto. The central theme of the novel is the exacting transformation of a 14-year-old child, John Grimes, whose life in various nuances looks like that of Baldwin. For Baldwin, one's energy to coordinate a legitimate, pensive appraisal finally prompts an association among individual and comprehensive experience.

## MAIN TEXT

The novel has been divided into three parts - 'The Seventh Day', 'The Prayers of the Saints' and 'The Threshing Floor' – which deal with the lives of John Grime, the protagonist, Gabriel – John's step father, Florence-John's aunt, Elizabeth – John's biological mother, Deborah – John's foster mother, Richard, the biological father of John and Royal, the biological son of Gabriel. The plot is knitted with the effects of a significantly tricked emotional religion on the fantasies, objectives, characteristics, and

experiences of these characters. This religion that fills the book and orders the plot is comparatively as huge as any character in the book. The novel researches the possibility of the Negro to achieve character and identity through the control of Christianity.

Through this novel, Baldwin presents a critical and hypocritical image of the Christian Church in the lives of the African-Americans by the depiction of John, his step father Gabriel, and other members of his so-called family. John's family is a part of the church and the novel focuses mainly on the religious conversion of John Grimes, as that of Baldwin himself, the biological son of Gabriel's third wife, Elizabeth and her lover Richard. John's step father Gabriel was born and brought up in the southern part of US where racial subjugation is on its peak so he had to migrate to Harlem, the Northern part of US. He became a preacher in the Church and also wanted John, who under the influence of his hypocritical and tyrannical step-father, tried to please him and transcend him. Baldwin before long found that his aching for self-articulation and imaginative creation could not be fulfilled by his profession in the congregation and the pressure delivered in him by his sexual experience, in spite of his position, prompted a split in his psyche, leaving the congregation following three years. Yet, the hold of the Christian

church, its music, and its energy, however not its substance, waited with it and shaped the reason for Baldwin's perspective on human life. He had been a vigorous, licensed evangelist of the Gospel for a very long time. During this time, he assimilated all parts of Christian regulation, denominational practice and, above all, scriptural picture, image, account and importance. His scriptural implications and references to the otherworldly awareness of the dark countries are incalculable.

This novel is semi-autobiographical as the writer has critically depicted his own experiences as a black among the whites, which offered rise to an unflinching duty to the mission for self-revelation. Baldwin thought about his condition and failings in his endeavors to locate the surrendered character in himself and in his dull skin. Over and over, in his organization, he showed cognizance of the way that character contains in order to have an established identity in the society where the black people are treated as animals not as human beings.

'Go Tell It on the Mountain' is essentially a matter of John Grimes' journey to discover who he truly is, to recognize the estimations of everyone around him from those he holds. It is no fortuitous event that the novel happens on its birthday, which is a day that speaks to a stage forward into development, or that it is its fourteenth, denoting the limit among youth and youthful adulthood, since it infers the start of adolescence. The purpose of growing up is to find one's own personality. John originates from a family that has a section to play in his life, but because of his dad's negligence and terrorizing, he cannot acknowledge that his part in this family is who he truly is. Indeed, even without realizing that Gabriel Grimes was not his genuine dad, John avoided him at all costs.

Seeing his highlights in a mirror, John does not fathom what to consider himself, and he was unable to determine what he most constantly needed to know: if his face was appalling. To settle the topic of his character, John goes past the highlights of his own character and appends his inclinations to somebody outside the family, Elisha. The loud, ostentatious strict experience that he has in the end satisfies his personality in various manners: it permits him to resemble Elisha by having a seizure like his; it makes the emphatically strict side of his family glad by turning John into their strict life; and it fulfils his young sense of self by being disorderly and intriguing and causing everyone to notice him.

The Second Part of the novel, 'The Prayers of the Saints' has woven the threads of operation, subjugation and marginalization of the black people by the whites. The novelist, through the inhumane experiences of Florence, Elizabeth, and Gabriel who relive their pasts in 1887 while in deep prayer, shows the dirty face and trauma of racism to the readers. In 'Florence's Prayer' she fearfully recounts the incident that happened with Deborah, Florence's friend and

neighbor, who, at the age of 16 years "had been taken away into the fields... by many white men who did things to her that made her cry and bleed." (64). Her father in anger went to that white man's house to retaliate but he was beaten mercilessly and threatened to set his house on fire so that none in the black community could come to help him. Deborah's after rape condition shows the inhumane face of the society which punished her first being a black and secondly being a woman. Though she was suffering from the stigma of a rap victim yet she was not an object of sympathy and mercy rather of hate and shame. Even the black people seemed to be misogynistic to have an imaginative glimpse of what had happened to her on the night she was abducted by the white people. Baldwin writes, "She could not be considered a woman, she could only be looked on as a harlot." (83).

The second prayer 'Gabriel's Prayer' is filled with sexual hunger, hypocrisy and mourning. Gabriel's religious mother tried her best to make him free from his irreligious activities like drinking and lust by confessing his sins and surrendering to God for becoming a devout Christian. He developed himself to be a preacher in the Church like Baldwin father - David but he could not get rid of his physical lust. He married Deborah to release her from the dishonor to which she had been forced so many years ago by the white men. Soon he developed a physical relationship with Esther. Royal was their illegitimate child who was brought up by his grandparents. At 16, Royal had to start work and he also became the victim of racial hatred. In a Chicago tavern, he was brutally murdered by the white beasts that had to face no trial from the side of society and state law. This is the very first time when Gabriel wept bitterly and in front of Deborah confessed that Royal was his own son from Esther whom he did not accept in fear of his wife, society and the Church.

The third prayer 'Elizabeth's Prayer' spoke of the irreparable loss and unfulfilled desire. Elizabeth, the representative of Baldwin's mother, is the real mother of John and the third wife of Gabriel. In her childhood, she lost her mother and was marginalized by her aunt who proved to be a fearful shadow for Elizabeth. In 1919, at the age of 18, she fell in love with Richard. In search of better education and employment both of them left south for the North. Their movement brings them little freedom of the racial discrimination and oppression. Being disappointed, Elizabeth affirms:

There was not, after all, a great difference between the world of the North and that of the South which she had fled; there was only this difference: The North promised more. And this similarity; what it promised it did not give, and what it gave, at length and grudgingly with one hand; it took back with the other. (189).

They started working in a hotel and living happily. Elizabeth conceived from Richard, but she did not tell him about it. Meanwhile Richard had to face the great misfortune of being black. He was waiting at the ground platform for the train when three black boys, who had robbed a store owner, were being chased by the police, came there and stood beside him. The police arrested all of them:

They were all coloured, they were about the same age, and here they stood together on the underground platform. And they were all, with no question asked, herded upstairs and into the wagon and to the police station. (198).

Richard tried his best to prove him innocent but nobody believed him. He was treated as an animal, beaten and tortured to confess the crime which he had not committed. Elizabeth had not enough money to hire a lawyer. He only prayed to God and wept full of tears for Richard helplessly. Though, Richard was finally let off yet his inner soul and ideals of life shattered badly and consequently he committed suicide of the racist society which imposed on him the identity of simply a Nigger. Thus, racism snatched the breath of an intellectual and destroyed the lives of Elizabeth and her upcoming child.

Baldwin and his fellow community members faced the real face of race and sex, which finds a unique explanation in his works. He always tried to add positive self-understanding to others. His self-data on his Black heritage, his thoughtfulness regarding his capacity as a writer and, explicitly, his goliath experiences as a dim gay specially in America, have added to his showing of self-definition and his sentiment of conferred fate to his locale. James Baldwin was formed by the age in which he lived. The cruel skirmish of his underlying life, the torture of being dim and poor in America, the assistance of his more energetic kin and sisters in Harlem, the experience of exacting transformation, have borne astonishing regular thing in the eagerness and humanity of his work. He has been a subject of conflict, both as a man and as a creator. The resistant thought of his musings can be explained due to the developmental changes in himself and character over an incredible period.

In fact, even the briefest summation of Baldwin's account shows the costs he paid, the mistreatment he stood up to, the maltreatment he endured, and the quality he got from the battle of thoughts. Encountering adolescence in the dirty Harlem region, young Baldwin was unsuitable to adjust to the dejection of his family, the incident of his schoolmates about his little size and real unpalatability, the real danger of the streets.

It was this atmosphere that astonished the sensitive young John, representing Baldwin with the basic choice that he would finally be constrained to make.

He should accumulate each available opportunity of perseverance and mental strength to move away from the degenerate universe of pimps, addicts, prostitutes, scoundrels and regular individuals, or he ought to neglect his journey for character, surrender and be overpowered by the ghastly states of his natural variables. He was busy with an interminable battle, so he commented:

We are brutally gotten between what we should be and what we truly are, and we can by no means whatsoever, become what we should be until we are glad to approach ourselves for what reason the lives we lead on this territory are so unfilled, so pleasant and accordingly disgusting ... (Quoted in Standley, Critical Essays 375).

In Baldwin's supposition, all individuals are caught between his own assumed picture of the world and reality so in a character's journey, one cannot deliver one's full energy. The muddled mixture of the mental and social components that Baldwin had made up the man and the craftsman would have been uncovered simply after a closer assessment of his own life. He finds something about the idea of the disdain and harshness in his heart. This novel opens with the 14<sup>th</sup> birthday of John Grime who, like Baldwin, is thinking of his family's expectations that he should become a preacher like his father who hates him. He is caught between his desire to win his father's affection and his hatred for his father who pretends to be very strict in the religious world on one hand and hypocritic in the name of religion. In fact, he has a quite different feeling of hatred for his father and this hatred enforces his decisions not to follow his father's decision. He hated his father and loved Elisha, a friend of the same sex. John confesses his intimate love for Elisha, his words and actions are indicating for his homosexual desire along with that of the writer. When John felt sinking in the darkness, it is the voice of Elisha that raises him up as "...nothing but the love of God can make the darkness light" (253). Though John has reached what he believes is the pinnacle of his faith, Gabriel still does not seem pleased. Csapo writes, "The central event of the novel, John's conversion, functions as a certain form of realization of his homosexuality as well as his defiance against the God of the fundamental black church." (2006:37).

The critics also consider Baldwin's *Go Tell It On The Mountain* as a legit, escalated, self-examination that works all the while to light up self, society, and humankind in general. The various autobiographical likenesses in his novels and the subtleties of his adolescence in Baldwin's own papers uncover the image of a poor, hungry, dread ridden dark Harlem kid battling under the severe strict orders of a stepfather who abhors him with his entire existence. David Baldwin, who married Baldwin's mother in 1927 when James

was three years of age, turned into a point of convergence of contention for contempt and regard in Baldwin's initial life and a portion of his best composition. He is Gabriel Grimes, the stepfather of John whose passing and memorial service was the first to be distributed. Difficult to get along, despised by his kids while he was alive, David Baldwin, all things considered, got symbolic for Baldwin of the agony of being dark male and poor in America.

Baldwin's delicate psyche enthusiastically longed for the love of his dad. However, it was this dad himself who made him mindful of his actual offensiveness, and it was this disdain that Baldwin needed to battle energetically. This later formed into an inclination to defy the figure of the dad. Familiarity with his dad's contempt and his own grotesqueness drove him to look for affection through fellowship and gay connections, to affirm that he was needed by somebody. This adoration-scorned relationship with his dad normally prompted the development of a timid and dubious perspective and an aching to state his own character.

## CONCLUSION

James Baldwin, a versatile genius, though faces a number of problems with the publication of this novel, yet he has been proved a realist to depict the disappointments coming from the powerlessness of black people to defy the more obscure side of their human instinct. Out of this disappointment came the creation of various literary pieces, showing the trauma of racism, through the autobiographical elements, to the outside world. This inability to confront manages and acknowledges the hazier motivations of one's own spirit are drastically depicted in this work. Though he seemed to be highly interested in masks-masks of blackness and maleness, yet he longed for being simply a writer who explores the reality of society and started with his own experiences. Peniel E. Joseph is right enough to say:

Perhaps more than any other writer before or since, James Baldwin distilled the anger, pain and passion of black life in America and beyond. As an essayist, playwright, and novelist Baldwin forever transformed public commentary and political inquiry on issues of race, violence, and democracy. (2008: IX).

## WORK CITED AND CONSULTED

- Allen, Shirley S. (1975). "Religious Symbolism and Psychic Reality in Baldwin's *Go and Tell It on the Mountain*", *CLA Journal* 19. Print.
- Abrams. M.H. (1981). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. New York: Holt Rinehart.
- Baldwin, James A. (1991). *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. New Delhi: Penguin Books. Print.

- Barksdale, Richard and Keneth Kirmamon, (eds.) (1972). *Black Writers of America: A Comprehensive Anthology*, New York: Macmillan Company. Print.
- Bigsby, C.W. E. (1967). "The Committed Writer: James Baldwin as Dramatist", *Twentieth Century Literature* 13: pp. 39-48. Print.
- Blair, Walter and Hamlin Hill (1978). *America's Humour*. New York. Oxford University Press.
- Bone, Robert A. (1965). "The Novels of James Baldwin", *Triquarterly* 2 (Winter 1965): pp. 3-20. Print.
- Boyle, Kay (1964). *Introducing James Baldwin*. In *Contemporary American Novelists*, ed. Harry T. Moore, pp. 155-57 Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Csapo and Csaba (2006). "Race, Religion and Sexuality in *Go Tell It On the Mountain* in Carol E. Henderson (ed.), *James Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain : Historical and Critical Essays* (New York, Peter Lang, 2006) pp. 57- 62. Print.
- Finn, James (1962). "The Identity of James Baldwin", *Commonwealth* (October 26, 1962): pp. 113-16. Print.
- Hardy, Clarence E. (2003). *James Baldwin's God*. Univ. of Tennessee Press. pp. 65. Print.
- Macebuah, Stanley (1973). *James Baldwin: A Critical Study*. New York: Third Press. Print.
- Spurlin, William (2006). "Go Tell It on the Mountain and Cold War Tropes of National Belonging" in Henderson, Carol E ed. *James Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain: Historical and Critical Essays*. Peter Lang Publishing. pp. 29-40. p. 37. Print.

## Corresponding Author

**Dr. Kanwar Pal Singh\***

Assistant Professor and Head, Department of English, Mihir Bhoj P.G. College, Dadri, G.B. Nagar

[ggkpsingh777@gmail.com](mailto:ggkpsingh777@gmail.com)