

Treatment Of Women In James Baldwin's *Go Tell It On The Mountain*

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Abstract:

A feminist study of the female characters in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* reveals the possibility of finding a solution to the age old issues. The novel shows that Black women experience trauma at the hands of both white and the members of their own race. Baldwin presents his characters to highlight the struggle of ordinary individuals and explains the difficulties that they face to survive. The female black characters are doubly marginalized and considered as a weak gender in society. Black women are at the receiving end of racial discrimination that provoked them to fight for gender equality and Baldwin is conscious of lifting up them in his works. Gender is the foundation on which *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is built. There is a hope that the possibility of the deeper structural change may enhance the present condition.

Keywords: Black Feminism, Gender Studies, Marginalization, New Negro Movement.

Black women experience oppression in the form of race, sex, and class. In all forms, the black women are suppressed in society. The term gender generally refers to the sex of a person, male or female. The traces of feminism and female oppression are evident in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* concentrates on the struggles women faced in the society, in homes as well as the difficulties they with men.

The feminist movement of the nineteenth century brought to light the struggles and the pathetic plight of women in a male oriented society. Feminism and Feminist theory envision for the rights and the equality of women on par with men. Within the emergence of women's movement, gender identity undergoes a significant transformation. A large number of activists have emerged in order to safeguard by fighting for the equality of women. Female writers in the literary field are becoming more prominent now whereas they were initially ignored as they have been considered less equals. They strongly raise their protest in their writing by citing the most conditions where women live in a substandard existence, raising a form in the midst of the public. However, a vast transformation is happening in the lives of women today. There are instances where women enjoy all the professions, which were once considered possible only by men.

The basic aim of feminist theory is to uplift women from their subordinate position in both society and at home. In society and households, males hold the primary position. Being black is considered marginalised whereas being black woman is doubly marginalised. The challenges they face as a black and as a woman are enormous. In the Harlem Renaissance Blacks protested against the society and made their grievances felt the generation to come. Race, sexuality, and class are the factors that lead to gender disparity in the west. Segregation occurs due to color, gender, and economic status. James Baldwin's novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* features female characters who struggle both at home and society. Whites, the dominant group, oppress other communities in the name of colour. This results in the degradation of a particular set of people in many aspects. The status of Black woman is considerably less than that of whites and feminists, such as Alice Walker and Rebecca Walker, raise their voices for the blacks.

As an African- American woman, Alice Walker observes that, "to be an artist and a black woman, even today, lowers our status in many respects, rather than raises it: and yet, artists we will be" (Shaffer). It is disheartening to state that even in contemporary times, racial segregation prevails in the west. The color of the skin is the main factor that contributes to racial discrimination. Because of colour the black woman stands as a victim among from their own community as well as from the whites. The term 'Renaissance' denotes 'rebirth'. The 'Harlem Renaissance' signifies the birth of culture, making the oppressed to set free from slavery, and getting them accommodated into the main part of society. The condition of African-Americans and their lives was so worse that Harlem revolution has given them some type of identity. At the time of "The Great Depression," Blacks suffered terribly which can be discerned in the records of world history. Blacks were victims of physical abuse, false accusations, and assault during turbulent times.

The second wave feminism, challenges male-oriented ideas. It focuses on gender equality and raised voices against discrimination. Black feminism or Afro-American women project their marginalized state in the medium of art. Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* reveals the state of Black women and their oppressed state of depressed lives. American poet and activist Maya Angelou was one of the victims of enslavement. In an interview with Bill Mayers, she shared her experience of slavery and injustice that women have been subjected to for a prolonged period of time. She addresses the suffering of black women in her works. African-American women's voices are derived from slave narratives and autobiographies. From Frances Harper to contemporary writers, Black literature has been the medium that expresses the plight of black women. Even black male writers expose the female struggles in their writing.

James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* exposes the suffering encountered by the female characters caused by their

own community. The onslaught of racism and sexism lead to miserable living in the lives of Black women of the 20th century. The essentially difficult conditions of black women are narrated in the works of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and many other writers. Intersectionality denotes multiple questioning of an identity, which interconnects one over the other. The term has a strong stand towards feministic concern. According to Kath T. Gines the term 'Intersectionality' appears during 19th century and formulated in 20th century. Intersectionality stands for identity and voices against oppression. During 19th century, black women were ignored for their race and gender where their identity was questioned in every aspects. The term 'Intersectionality' was coined by black feminist Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, which talks about the ill treatment of black women owing to gender and race. She cries out:

And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I could have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? (qtd. in. sexuality)

This proves the suffering of black woman from multiple means and the longing for an ordinary existence when their children are sold for money. Starvation made them to forget everything including the children. They are pushed into a pathetic condition where they take the ultimate unforgettable decision of selling their children for life.

In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, James Baldwin, an American writer, born in Harlem, has achieved recognition for his contributions to both gay and African-American literature. His novels often deal with the themes of sexuality, racial issues, and religion. *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, published in 1953, is a semi-autobiographical novel. The author places him in the position of the protagonist. This novel is considered as a master piece in literature. The author closely observes the sexual and racial issues prevalent in the society. During his childhood he struggles a lot and always finds detached from his father. The relationship between him and his father is also portrayed in characters like Gabriel and Roy.

This paper focuses on the type of subjugation female characters who have undergone to racial and sexual abuses. Black women are subjected to double oppression. The intersectionality of gender and color results in discrimination where the perspective of female characters is expressed in certain chapters of the novel such as "Florence's Prayer" and "Elizabeth's Prayer".

Florence, Elizabeth, Deborah, and Esther are the notable female characters. The lives of these characters have been in one way or the other put into different difficult circumstances. Due to their blackness, these characters are marginalized and given secondary importance by their own people and by the whites too. For example, Deborah is isolated in the midst of other black women as she happens to be the victim of rape. This made her feel that she has been excluded from her own people. On the other hand, Deborah's husband Gabriel treats her with contempt. This indicates that she lives an unhappy life in with her own race. The narrator also recounts the instances of violence meted out to her in the hands of strange, white males. Baldwin describes the inexplicable agony of Deborah, a sixteen-year-old, who was dragged into the fields by a group of white men who sexually assaulted her. Florence, Deborah's neighbour, stated the condition of Deborah as:

"Their neighbor Deborah, who as sixteen, three years older than Florence, had been taken away into the fields that night before by many white men, where they did things to her to make her cry and bleed." (GTM, 77)

This instance fears testimony to the trauma experienced by black women who are humiliated and physically abused by the white supremacy.

Deborah is shown to be sympathetic character after her marriage with Gabriel. Gabriel is the symbol of male supremacy. While working as a preacher in the church, he causes Esther to become pregnant, and they have a child named Royal. Gabriel completely conceals the information about his child Royal born of the first wife Elizabeth from Deborah. While Deborah and her father were humiliated when her father pursued justice for her daughter, Deborah's experience as a victim of rape resulted into hatred and dislike for all men. As a result, her life becomes meaningless. The following statement describes her condition.

That night robbed her of the right to be considered a woman. No man would approach her in honour because she was a living approach, to herself and all black women and to all black men. Lust stirred in the eyes of men when they looked at Deborah, lust that could not be endured because it was so impersonal, limiting communion to the area of her shame. (83)

As the woman character experiences physical violence from a group of males, her honor of living is being questioned by the general public. This is the psychological trauma experienced by Deborah, a black woman.

The second part of the novel entitled 'Florence's Prayer', expresses Florence's struggle as a black woman. Florence and Gabriel are siblings. Her mother prefers her brother over her as she is fond of a male child. Florence's mother expects her to give up her life for the sake of her brother. It indicates the preference for one gender over another and it is an act of discrimination. It is unpleasant to note that gender inequality begins even at home. The narration goes as, "And he needed the education that Florence desired far more than he, and that she might have got if he had not been born" (82). This brings out the negligence in adopting basic rights, where black women have been ignored consistently. Black women are subjected to slavery and female black writers Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Octavia Butler have written on the enslavement of women. This forced slavery is represented in slave narratives. These narratives recorded the agony

experienced by young and old girls in the forms of their white masters. Harriet Jacob's autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, states:

No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men. The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage. (Ch- V, 45)

This statement proves that a woman of any age has to follow the order of the master. It highlights the illtreatment and danger of woman standing as a victim from young age.

Black women are forced to near physical assault by their masters. Jacob describes the situation of black women as, "When they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women" (Qtd.in. Scroll). The sexual exploitation took place in a larger scale before Harlem. The theme of racism is so deeply enrooted that it divides the society into two sets. British writer Mary Wollstonecraft considers herself a feminist and shares the rights of women in her famous work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Being a black woman is difficult to survive in American society. Florence recounts her life in the 1900s. She has been working as a cook for a white family, where she faces discomfort with the white man who proposes her to be his mistress. This made her shattered and she decided to move to New York. Although her mother disagrees with her decision, she strongly defends her stand. The story opens a new chapter in the life of a black woman, as Florence stands alone and decides to face and overcome all the obstacles. She is humiliated and alienated from her husband who maintains relationship with another woman, "She hated Frank for making this woman official witness to her humiliation" (94). The illtreatment of her husband embarrassed her and she feels that she is a slave in her own house. However her husband's behavior is making her to feel like a slave in her home. She is fed up with her husband's routine because he drinks with his friends and smokes regularly. In this case Florence as a woman and as a wife of Frank is a 'sufferer' and this makes her to think that she is a slave who doesn't have respect even at her home.

Florence's mother shares her experiences of slavery during her life time working in a plantation as a field worker. She describes slavery and death as, "Slaves in another country had fired the master's houses and fields and dashed their children to death against the stones" (80). This incident shows the life threatening events at the master's plantation when blacks talk about their oppressed lives they live under their masters. Florence's mother serves as a metaphor for Baldwin's portrayal of the persistent gender inequality in black community. She states, "There was only one future in that house, and it was Gabriel's — to which, since Gabriel was a male-child, all else must be sacrificed" (82). This strongly proves the gender inequality in the very basis of home itself where the male child is considered superior and the female child is treated as secondary where sacrificial of dream happens ruthlessly. The female child sacrifices herself for the smooth sail of the order prevailing to set in motion.

Being a black woman, Florence is doubly oppressed within her home and society. Her mother points out, "Florence would by and by be married, and have own children of her own", whereas in the case of Gabriel she states, "Gabriel was a man; he would go out and work" (82). The males are allowed to work outside the house and the females have to do household chores. Esther, Gabriel's mistress, plays an important role in this novel. She had to endure hardship to find shelter after telling Gabriel about her pregnancy. Gabriel turned down her invitation because he is already married to Deborah. His lust, despite being a preacher, is intended to ruin another woman. His hatred for his wife is fueled by his attraction to Esther. Esther and Gabriel entangle into a toxic relationship. Esther wishes to have a decent life style where Gabriel tries to spoil her. He states, "Satan tempted me and I fell. I ain't the first man been made to fall on account of a wicked woman" (152). The irresponsible attitude of Gabriel is displayed in his refusal to admit pregnant Esther.

The novel is narrated in the third person narrative, from the character's point of view, and frequently the passages switch over from past to present. Elizabeth, a black woman, has been portrayed as a pathetic character in the past as well as present. Her love for Richard was strong before marrying Gabriel. On the other hand, her childhood trauma convinced her that she could lead a fulfilling life on leaving her aunt's house. Gabriel is a male-oriented character who controls everyone in the house and assaults his seemed wife Elizabeth. She is the wife of Gabriel after his death of Deborah. In her past, Richard was dead because of a false accusation of stealing in the store. In the chapter "Elizabeth's Prayer", Richard presents the testimony of the atrocities and humiliation of whites. Richard's death had a profound impact on Elizabeth's life. Currently, Elizabeth has been cornered about Gabriel, which has caused her to live a traumatic life. The concern of Elizabeth for Gabriel leave her to lead a traumatic existence.

Baldwin's the study of the female characters in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* reveals the traumatic condition of black women in society and at home. Both gender and race are sources of oppression for black women. However, certain characters manage to escape slavery and achieve freedom in their own way. Florence is one such character who decides to make a change of herself.

Blacks of late have attained some sort of solace with the 19th amendment of the constitution. African-American got improved now and they have their rights to voice their protest yet, the oppression towards gender and race continues in the larger scale of American society. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain* James Baldwin portrays women as figures of resilience

and moral strength, navigation a world that marginalizes them through intersecting forces of race, gender, and religious oppression. Character like Elizabeth, Florence, and Deborah reveal the emotional burdens, sacrifices, and silent suffering imposed upon Black women, yet they embody a quiet resistance that challenges the boundaries of their roles. Baldwin's nuanced treatment of these women highlights the complexities of their identities, showing them as more than mere victims they are individuals with agency, endurance, and a powerful moral clarity. Ultimately, Baldwin uses their stories to critique the oppressive structures around them and underscore the profound resilience and strength of Black women in the face of adversity. What stands out in the end is that these women continue to exist with a hope, a hope that would never remain a dream.

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