

## 2. Black Consciousness in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

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### **Abstract:**

*Black Consciousness implies the consciousness of being an African American and of being sensitively aware of the culture, history and all that is connected to the African American with present, past and the future. Black consciousness grew out of the unrelieved suffering and psychological traumas of a group of people who were subjected to overt and covert racism in the USA for about four centuries. It gives us an insight into their predicaments. In a way, it is a counter-culture to racism and definitely not a means to hatred, but is aiming at social change. Hansberry introduces spirituals, Jazz and blues and other aspects of African American culture throughout Raisin. He feels that the liberation that the Africans need is not a religious conversion which leads to further exploitation, but political freedom.*

### **Keywords:**

*Black Consciousness; culture; traumas; social; liberation*

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**Vol. 5 No. 2 (2017)**

**Issue- June**

**ISSN 2347-6869 (E) & ISSN 2347-2146 (P)**

Black Consciousness in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* by Amaladhas Page no. 9-14

DOI: 10.5958/2347-6869.2017.00011.5



# Black Consciousness in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

Black consciousness is not merely a color consciousness, but all that is connected with the Black in their Past, Present and the Future. It is essentially the result of their Black experience such as the displacement from Africa to America and movement from black culture to white, tribal religion to Christianity, from slavery to enfranchisement, from the South to North. Consequently, they suffered disorientation and alienation and perpetually faced with the problem of identity. The Black's historical past, their cultural heritage, denial of freedom, slavery, denial of fundamental rights, pitiable economic condition, sufferings, buffetings and disparities have conglomerated to make up their consciousness. The black experience is a condition of existence, while Black consciousness is a condition of both existence and essence. Blacks, to start with, were considered to be non-human, hence to be brutalized by the whites. As time passed attempts were made to assimilate them into the larger fabric of society by stripping them of their identity, but they are, being Americans and African Americans, faced with dual identity or no identity.

Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* illuminates the matrix of black consciousness through the black American experience. Explain more what is meant. The struggle for identity is one of the problems in Baldwin's twentieth-century novel. John Grimes, the stepson of Gabriel and bastard child of Elizabeth, yearns for a mountain, i.e. self-acceptance. Explain the symbolism of the mountain as related to self-acceptance. His feelings of guilt, shame, and hatred prevent him from achieving his self-acceptance. Yes, when John triumphs over religion and family he is able to accept himself. The novel again investigates the possibility of blacks in general achieving identity through the discipline of Christianity. The analogy of father and son--Abraham with Ismael-- and America with blacks is able to establish that blacks are the bastard children of American culture and civilization where they don't find acceptance as legal heirs and children.

Florence is one of Baldwin's characters who has been absorbed into the dominant culture and considers the concept of Blackness as low, contemptible, even evil. The assimilationist that she is, she cannot accept the "Common niggers." She doesn't accept her color and uses skin whiteners. Baldwin has said, "The American image of the Negro lives also in the Negro's heart, and when he has surrendered to his image, life has no other possible reality" (33). The theme of alienation runs through the novel. Gabriel is deserted by his father. He, in turn, disowns his son by Esther. After marrying Elizabeth, he alienates his stepson John. Although Elizabeth loves her father, she is separated from him at her mother's death, which makes her feel alienated from her father.

Michaux graphically sums up the attitude of the whites towards blacks. "The Negro is not a man; it is a thing to be used, abused, accused, and confused. He is a political tool, he's an economic

stool, and he is religious fool. His politicians are picked. His economy is fixed and his preachers are tricked. The politician pacifies, the preacher sanctifies; and white man crucifies" (57). Such an attitude brought forth deep hatred for whites and it paradoxically was turned against them too and made them live in a constant state of hatred which resulted in their desire to escape from the reality of life. By using flashback technique, Baldwin goes back to the period of slavery, emancipation, and the great migration period. Rachel, Gabriel's mother, was a slave; she lost all of her children, one by sickness, two by auction, and one was brought up at the master's house where she never dared to enter. Later on, soldiers from North came and the Southern slaves were freed. In the novel, many of the characters hate the whites and often their hatred turns towards their own family people. John, Florence, Elizabeth, all have the tendency to escape and want to go away from the place where they live. John tells his small sister to run away when she grows up.

Baldwin narrates twentieth-century life in the Harlem ghetto, which is one mired with misery and poverty. Addison Gayle says, "No writer knows the ghetto or its people better than Baldwin" (7). The preacher Gabriel couldn't feed his children. He shovels snow even in zero weather. Roy says "I been hungry plenty of times. There is juvenile delinquency. They are accused of gambling, drinking and free sex" (88). Roy quarrels with white boys and gets hurt. Some boys steal from shops. Royal was murdered at Chicago. They have no job opportunities. Many girls become harlots for their survival. Freedom to move from one place to another is curtailed. A black soldier was brutally killed by whites in their street. John felt that he couldn't get into shops and restaurants where white people enter. A white master wanted Florence to be his concubine. Deborah was carried to fields and she was gang raped by white men. They beat her father. Richard was picked up as robbery suspect by police and beaten brutally and was kept behind the bars. Justice was denied to him. Later on, he committed suicide due to the predicament. The preacher Gabriel was very much afraid to go and purchase medicine for his ailing wife, because blacks cannot walk in the streets where whites lived. This racial discrimination is founding Toni Morison's *Sula* also. Nel and her mother were insulted by the white conductor for entering into a compartment meant for whites, and again in the railway waiting room blacks have no toilets and they have to go behind tall grass. Elizabeth and Florence work as cleaning women, which suggests exploitation of black labor and black women. Again, there is a lack of intra familial affectionate relationship. Florence and Frank always quarrel. After ten years of married life Frank leaves Florence and lives with another woman. Gabriel's father deserts the family and Gabriel too never loves his children and wife, rather he beats them. Writing about Northern Negroes, Fenny Kemble says,

They are not slaves indeed, but they are pariahs debarred from every fellowship, save with their own despised race . . . . All hands are extended to thrust them out, all fingers point at their dusky skin, all tongues have learned to turn the very name of their race into an insult and a reproach. (56)

Blacks were persecuted everywhere like the Israelis who were in Egypt. John had read about the things White people did to colored people in the south. White people cheated them of their wages. The blacks were mercilessly burned and shot down. They were lynched and burned in the electric chairs for things they had not done. They were tortured in prison and in riots they were beaten with clubs. This should come from the text and not generalizations.

Baldwin writes about the great migration and emancipation. Many characters move from the South to North with a hope of a better future. Elizabeth and Florence's life become a life of frustration: Esther dies at child birth, Richard commits suicide, and Frank goes to France and dies there. Most of the characters are color conscious. They consider it a stigma. They are made conscious of it by the treatment given to them by others. A policeman called Richard "black bastard". Florence is very much conscious of her color. She tells her husband, "I know you don't want a coal black woman". Again, they associate it with sin and damnation. The words black, dark, dust, and dirt are very often used. The word "grimes" stands for dust and dirt. While cleaning John finds dirt everywhere and he feels that his sin is like darkness.

Blacks in the novel try to find comfort in Christianity. But they found that the doctrines and theological concepts were degrading them. They understood black was not only the color of the skin, but it was the color of sin. It, however, served as a tranquilizer, made him think about the world to come and forget or rather accept the present state of his life. Baldwin, through religion reveals the "Black consciousness." Almost all the characters go to the church and they are sin conscious. The singing and clapping of hands serve as a safety valve and spiritual bleaching cream. As Baldwin narrates the story, he introduces Deborah as a "holy fool". citation The epithet holy fool is applicable to all the blacks. Deborah's relationship with Gabriel has not yielded any fruit. He betrays her, but she remains faithful, though she knows of his betrayal. In a similar way, they know the nature of White America, yet they remain true to their faith. They try to tolerate and accommodate. Baldwin writes, "All American institutions including the church are inherently racist and meant to keep the nigger in his place" (36).

Through the introduction of black theology explain, African Americans are able to destroy White America's definition of blackness and sustain themselves in their struggle for black identity by identifying with the revolutionary teachings of Jesus Christ. Add specifics. Blacks are not only socio-political, but also a psychological one. Black consciousness is a product of conflict they encounter within and without. They face repression from the White world and in the church. The Libido is suppressed and they wait for a substitute to express. The result is hatred, fear, shame and inferiority complex. When they find that they are powerless in the outside world, they try to establish their power in their family and as a result meet with domestic conflicts. The character Gabriel is full of hatred for the whites and again he wants to establish his power in the family and scolds John unnecessarily and beats his wife, Elizabeth. Frank, to assert his manhood and superiority purchases things which are not needed for the household. John is filled with shame when he thinks of

masturbation. The pastor James finds fault with the relationship of Ella Mae and Elisha and he says that the sin is in their heart, consequently they are full of shame and not able to have a normal human relationship.

Martin Luther king talked of a dream and Langston Hughes wrote of a dream deferred and a dream dries up like a raisin in the sun. In the novel, John dreams of a comfortable life, a life that of whites but he feels it is not meant for him. Richard is ambitious and he wants to learn whatever the whites have learnt, but when he understands that he cannot, he is filled with rage and shame and finally commits suicide. Florence has an ambition of having a good family life and a house of her own. But she too meets with frustration.

In the "threshing floor," John comes across "armies of darkness" and witnesses their sufferings, humiliation, and death. He tries to fly away from this "armies of darkness", or the very black experience. But the more he tries to escape, the more miserable he becomes. At length, he attains maturation not by transcending blackness, but by identifying himself with the armies of blackness and he himself becomes a soldier who is ready to fight for a new world a world free from all exploitations. "Then I buckled up my shoes And I started" (11).

Even Immanuel Kant went to the extent of saying, "So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man (that) it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color which perhaps deserved to be considered, but in short, this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid" (76). In fact, African Americans have their culture which is manifested in the blues, Jazz and spiritual. Blacks are though like eagles, treated and made to believe that they are chickens. Ralph Ellison writes, "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (33). A sea change in basic attitudes or political consciousness made the black culture visible. Through race pride blacks began to rebuild what the whites have torn down. Harlem Renaissance, Black aesthetic movement and the organization like NAACP, Urban league, CORE and SNCC have contributed significantly to the growth of black consciousness.

Black power movement opted for a place governed by the sensibilities and attitudes of black people. In fact, writers like James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry and Toni Morrison are not for an exodus or diaspora, but for a better future or circumstance in which man will be treated as man. Baldwin writes, "Negroes want to be treated like men" (7). In the near vague future, Blacks want a real freedom and they want representation in planning and decision making and want their Africanity shaped by new guidelines, new values, new goals, and new structures.

Baldwin says, "People who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are" (27). This experience has brought them a greater capacity of endurance and black intellectuals believe that it will strengthen them and make them grow. Baldwin is a witness and spokesman of Black experience and Black consciousness, and he has made himself heard in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

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### Cite this article:

Black Consciousness in James Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain

### Citation Format: APA:

Dr. J., A. (2017). Black Consciousness in James Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain. S O C R A T E S, 5(2), 9-14. Retrieved from <http://socratesjournal.com/index.php/socrates/article/view/294>

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