

Echoes of the Past: A Post-Traumatic Reading of Racial Injustice in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

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Abstract

*Trauma is an encounter of the violent event, with its unexpectedness and horror. Traumatic disorders transpire when there is an interplay between the experience and memory along with their gender violence. The most destructive psychiatric disorder of all is post-traumatic stress disorder that provides a direct link between psyche and external violence. This paper explores the psychological impact of racial discrimination through a trauma-theoretical lens in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Focusing on the characters of Richard and Elizabeth, the study examines how post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) manifests as a result of systemic racism, personal loss, and generational trauma within the African American experience. Drawing on theories by Sigmund Freud and Cathy Caruth, the paper identifies symptoms of PTSD such as re-experiencing, avoidance, emotional numbing, and heightened arousal in the lives of Baldwin's characters.*

Through close textual analysis, the study reveals how Baldwin portrays trauma not only as an individual psychological struggle but also as a collective historical burden that shapes identity and relationships. Despite enduring emotional suffering, both Richard and Elizabeth exhibit forms of resilience and resistance, underscoring Baldwin's nuanced portrayal of survival amid oppression. This research contributes to trauma studies in literature by highlighting how Baldwin's narrative reflects the enduring scars of racial injustice and the psychological complexities of Black life in America.

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The novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is written by James Baldwin and published in 1953. It is a semi-autobiographical novel that describes about the identity and racial struggles through the experience of an African American family. Allen says that, “*Go Tell It on the Mountain* is an authentic and convincing presentation of a wide range of that experience from the days of slavery in the south to the Harlem of Baldwin’s youth and obviously Baldwin weaves the black versus white theme (173).

The novel highlights the life history of John Grimes, a sensitive teenager, who is fighting against his faith and family expectation. The novel reveals about the past of several key characters including John’s strict religious step father, Gabriel, his mother Elizabeth and aunt Florence. John has a strong conflict towards the attitude of his father, Gabriel because he lays spiritual and emotional burden on the family. According to Connolly, “Gabriel claims to be sanctified and living a holy life, he has committed adultery, fathered an illegitimate son, and then abandoned the woman and his child (120). In the climax of the novel, John experiences a religious awakening. It also portrays Black church culture along with racial tensions. Elizabeth, a reserved and quiet woman has undergone hardships due to Gabriel’s temper. She was strictly raised by her aunt. Richard is her boyfriend and he committed suicide before the birth of John, leaving Elizabeth with a child. Later she was married to Gabriel.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) faced by the characters who face racism in the society. It also explores the powerful depiction of life in the midst of dilemmas and pain. This novel examines various symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. The objectives of this paper is to portray impact of racism in the society deeply connected with Richard and Elizabeth. It focuses the exploration of generational trauma and emotional suffering.

Several researchers have done a varied study on *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and most of the studies are based on religious faith. Allen’s “Religious Symbolism and Psychic Reality in Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*” highlights Baldwin’s extensive use of biblical allusion and symbolic representation of psychic realities. Scruggs explores that the novel has an intellectual history and so the characters in the novel is haunted by double moral judgment in the city. Courage’s “James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*: Voice of a People” focuses on the voices of the common people who has strong faith in religious consciousness. Connolly presents the shame, rage and endless battle of niggers running around with a hope to escape. Florence uses his brother Gabriel as a victim of systematic pressure and individual violence. Lunden explains the progress of pilgrim since Baldwin has used religious themes to highlight the psychological step from dependence to a sense of self. Lynch expresses that the novel is treated as an ironic indictment of the black church for its entrapment and suppression of individuals. Graves opines that since Baldwin is a Negro, he trim away all sorts of sympathies and attitudes and asks

questions about basic esthetic and moral qualities.

Trauma is the confrontation of the horrible experience, with its horror and unexpectedness. According to Caruth, “traumatic neurosis is not the reaction to any horrible event but rather the peculiar and perplexing experience of survival” (60). Traumatic theory relies on the theory of Freud’s analysis to bring out the patterns of suffering that occur to an individual. Trauma theory highlights the post structure approaches to analyse literary texts. These approaches emerged after the publication of *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and the History* by Cathy Caruth and *Kali Tal’s World of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma*.

Trauma comes out of traumatic experience, it drives an individual to traumatic stress followed by traumatic stress disorder. Traumatic stress disorder is a serious mental disturbance that happens due to the traumatic experience. It occurs when a person gets neglected, abused, losing a faith towards the favourable one or witnessing violence. Post-traumatic stress disorder provides a direct link between the psyche and the external violence of a person. According to Freud, “Traumatic experience is forcing itself upon the patient is a proof of the strength of experience: the patient is . . . fixed to his trauma . . . patients suffering from traumatic neurosis are much occupied in their waking lies with the memories of their accident” (13).

As stated by the National Institute of Mental Health, the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder are divided into four categories. They are re-experiencing symptoms, avoidance symptoms, arousal and reactivity symptoms and cognition and mood symptoms. James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, the first novel, portrays Baldwin’s experiences as a preacher. He describes the position of black people in American society. Almost all the characters in the novel undergo various symptoms of Post-traumatic stress disorder. This study mainly focuses on the stress disorders faced by Richard and Elizabeth, the blacks who live in American society. According to Caruth “Trauma thus seems to evoke the difficult truth of a history that is constituted by the very incomprehensibility of its occurrence” (153). Trauma has evoked the difficult truth that lies in the history of Blacks when they are subjected to racism in an American society. As a result of trauma Richard and Elizabeth have undergone various symptoms of re-experiencing symptoms such as flashback, dreams, nightmare, fear and traumatic thoughts.

PTSD - Post-traumatic stress disorder, directs a person to think about the past attitudes or the sufferings to survive in a society. Richard and Elizabeth too think about the past attitudes and the sufferings as they are living in American society. Elizabeth thought that it was impossible for both of them to live in the midst of white people. So she starts to dream about it because she has been victimized by a lot of violence in America. Elizabeth says “at home in Maryland to think about, but from which now she could not escape, the problem of their life . . . great dreaming” (188). According to the experience that Elizabeth has undergone, she says that they cannot escape from the problem of their life that comes out of their race and it makes her to be the victim of post-traumatic stress disorder. Freud claims the

returning of traumatic dreams as the literal return of the event against the intention of one inhibits. "Dreams occurring in traumatic neurosis have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fight . . . that their dreams should put them back at night into the situation that caused them to fall ill" (13).

Racial discrimination directs a person to post-traumatic stress disorders. To Elizabeth dreams occur due to traumatic neuroses that she remembers about the loss of her mother and her abandoned father. She is also haunted by the depression that was given by her aunt. "She remembers her aunt's dark house, the house that always smelled of clothes. She remembers herself entering any room in which her aunt might be sitting, responding to anything her aunt might say, standing before her, as metal and cancerous with hate and fear in battle, every hour of every day, a battle that she continued in her dreams" (182). It shows the traumatic stress of Elizabeth while she was living with her aunt. It is more certain that the dreams are continuous exposure of the stressed experience that she faces in her tragic life.

Racial discrimination directs a person to post-traumatic stress disorders. Elizabeth and Richard are the victims of post-traumatic disorder and so they undergo avoiding certain places. When Richard takes Elizabeth to the museum she fears to enter into it because she heard the punishments that the blacks receives when they plan to enter in to museums, "the first time he suggested this, she demanded in panic, if they would be allowed to enter her"(192). Cane the fourth of *Any Known Blood* by Lawrence Hill has undergone traumatic disorder when he enters into a hotel to have his food. The trouble that he has witnessed in the hotel, leads to stress disorders and so he inhibits the avoidance symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder like that of Elizabeth.

Fear that comes out of racial discrimination leads to the generational anxiety of an individual. Richard encountered this generational fear when he is waiting for a train in the underground railway station. He saw three coloured boys running with rugged cloths followed by the white police men. He fears of being arrested by them. Without enquiring him, he is arrested by the police men. "He came full awake, in panic; he knew that whatever the trouble was, it was now his trouble also; for these white man would make no distinction between him and the three boys they were after"(198). The fear that comes in his mind when he sees the white cops highlights the generational anxiety that comes out of Post traumatic stress disorder.

Elizabeth becomes the victim of the re-experiencing symptom of Post traumatic stress disorder. After the death of Richard, Elizabeth is worried about the future of her black son John, who will be subjected to discrimination like other boys in America and her own boyfriend Richard. Elizabeth is haunted by her past memory about Richard who is falsely accused by the cops.

She found herself staring at him darkly, as though she were trying to read his future in hid face. . . . Richard had been a fatherless child, she helplessly, bitterly remembered as she carried John through the busy,

summer, Sunday streets. . . . And she thought of the boys who had gone to prison. Were they there still? Would John be one of these boys one day? (207)

It highlights the re-experiencing symptom undergone by Elizabeth after the loss of her boyfriend thinking about the future of her son like his father who ended his life in great pain and disappointment.

Richard and Elizabeth explore the negative emotional state that results in distress or anxiety in the minds of the victims of traumatic stress disorder. The psyche of the individuals are disturbed to a greater extent by the symptoms of stress disorder. Though Richard and Elizabeth in the novel undergo post-traumatic stress disorder they determine to survive and stay focus in their dream of survival amidst this white patriarchal society. Astonished by Richard's knowledge and smartness, Elizabeth enquired about Richard's curiosity to know about the world. He answered in a tone of anger and resilience towards the white society, "I just decided me one day that I was going to get to know everything them white bastards knew, and I was going to get to know it better than them, so could no white son-of-a-bitch nowhere never talk me down, and never make me feel like I was dirt, . . ." (194). They try to overcome their stress with optimistic thoughts.

She knew that her weeping and her prayers were in vain. What was coming would surely come; nothing could stop it. She has tried, once, to protect come one and had only hurled him into prison . . . she had thought so often, that it might have been better . . . to have done what she had first determined in her heart to do- to have given her son away to stranger, who might have loved him more than Gabriel had ever loved him . . . he would love her nameless son as though he were his own flesh.(203)

Elizabeth attained resilience in the midst of unended suffering because she avoids conflict with Gabriel. It is not because of submission but because she has learned to fight to prove her justice. He silence is not a weakness but it is a self-preservation. Elizabeth reflects on the past, where she failed to protect Richard when he was wrongfully accused. This traumatic experience shaped her life and hope.

James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is a powerful literary portrayal of how racial injustice and generational trauma shape the emotional and psychological lives of African Americans. Through the lens of post-traumatic stress disorder, particularly in the characters of Richard and Elizabeth, the novel explores the lingering effects of systemic racism, personal loss, and social alienation. The article does not merely highlight suffering; it also illuminates resilience - the silent strength of Elizabeth, the fierce determination of Richard, and the complex spiritual awakening of John. Baldwin's nuanced depiction of trauma extends beyond individual experiences to reflect a collective historical pain, making the novel a timeless and deeply human examination of identity, faith, and survival in the face of enduring oppression.

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