

**RELIGION AND THE SOCIETY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF JAMES BALDWIN'S
*GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAINS***

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ABSTRACT: Religion and the society are mostly inter-related and inter connected. In almost every nation around the globe, both religion and the society are mingled in some form or the other. While in some society, Religion has a deeper influence, in others it is not so. James Baldwin is one of the predominant American writers who was concerned with race, the society and the religion. Being a black writer provided him the opportunity to witness the deepest onslaughts on human race, and unlike others who resort to physical means, he deeply analyzed the problem of race and religion which is evident in his works. During the times of Colonization, while religion was employed as a means of suppression, the same religion, in particular churches served as places of refuge for the blacks in the hostile white world, and the church served as a place of catharsis where they vent out their feelings and emotions. On the real note, Religion was widely employed as a mode of suppressing the majority, in particular the blacks by projecting onto them an evil image and for Baldwin religion also served as a medium of escape, an escape from the white community. Even further when he found that the religion was hugely favored, he resorts to different means. This research paper attempts to analyze the relation between religion and the society with special mention to James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountains*.

Key Words: Religion, Society, Colonization, escape, white, black.

Religion has played a pivotal role in almost all the societies. Almost all the activities in the society is connected to the religion, in some way or the other, and it has also led to the

shaping of the society in some way or the other. Religion has played an important role in taking various moral positions on issues like homosexuality and abortion. The history of religion in America had its roots back in the days of the American Revolution. Though Islam was brought into America along with slavery, Christianity was the most influential community, because of the fact that almost all the founding fathers of the American Revolution were active in the church. The Whites in America were mostly part of the Calvinist or the Protestant church, while the blacks were part of the Methodist or the Baptist church, and their preachers were provided with moral, political and leadership roles. While many of these denominations lost their influence by the 1970s and many other religious institutions coming into existence, religion in America has been always on the frontline and has played an important role in the society.

Religion differs with each individual. While some use religion to attain peace and salvation, for other religion is just another place of enjoyment and as a source of business. While Religion was employed as a survival tool by the blacks, the same religion was used as a tool of establishing slavery by the whites. A quick relook into the blacks history in America will reveal that Religion was the only thing they can resort to, the only thing that can offer them comfort amidst all the chaos and Religion was the only means of uniting the people and the role of the Black church from the small regions of Harlem to achieve national importance. Church served as a survival strategy even for Baldwin, and 'safety' and 'church' are synonymous to him.

James Baldwin was one of the very few American writers, who understood the idea of religion and most of his understanding came from his own personal experience, being a junior preacher. Moreover, Baldwin being a victim of white power, degradation and brutality of the Harlem reflects in his novels reflect the difficulties of individuals for whom the question of personal identity bears an urgent relation to that of social survival because of their colour or sexuality. Baldwin makes a similar remark in his novel, *Giovanni's Room*: "People invent categories in order to feel safe. White people invented black people to give white people identity." (88)

The novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountains* forms part of the initial writings of Baldwin, during which he was going through a process of understanding religion. The novel deal with his calamitous relationship with his preacher step father, and his confusion over his sexuality. Moreover, the novel is filled with religious allusions and symbols. Baldwin in this novel portrays the nature of religion practiced in the Harlem, how religion was employed as a tool of subjugating their own folks, and also the mindset of the religious preachers, under the mast

of being a preacher and the freedom of doing anything under the same. The title of the novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountains*, is itself taken from a Negro spiritual which deals about the birth of Christ. Moreover, the mountain in the title denotes Mount Sinai or Mount Zion where Moses and John preached about the Jewish exiles and spreading the news of happiness. Even the chapters in the novel allude to Biblical connotations.

Religion in the American world during the days of slavery was employed as one of the modes of promoting slavery. The Church (the white church) or the Calvinistic church promoted the enslavement of the black people. In terms of Orientalism, Religion has been employed as a mass tool of suppression, favouring a particular sect of people (the whites) and subjugation the 'other' (the blacks and the mixed races), which includes the majority of the people. Christianity has been the major religion in America. The Whites had their own justification of subjugating the blacks, as they consider themselves superior and as a duty to instruct and educate the black. Harriet Beecher Stowe in her novel, *Dred* brings forth a similar mentality that exists within the white folks,

I haven't the slightest doubt that slavery is a divinely appointed institution, and the rights of the masters are sanctioned by God; so however much I may naturally feel for this woman, whose position is, I must say, an unfortunate one, still it is my duty to see that the law is properly administered in the case.
(207)

Even though, James Baldwin writes his novels during the period when slavery is no longer legal, the disparities between the whites and blacks still remain the same, the religious differences still exist. The spiritual creations of African American religion were born out of their prayers for mercy. Moreover, the religion Christianity states the birth and subjugation of the woman in the chapter, Genesis. The moment the woman was made out the flesh and bone of the man, marks the beginning of suppression of women. Furthermore, the suppression of women continued when she sought to her own desires against the will of God. And this state of suppression which started is still carried out in one form or the other. Genesis 2:23 of The Holy Bible which states: This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman' for she was taken out of man.

Religion has been employed as a tool of oppression and subjugation for a very long time. As Karl Marx observes, "Man makes religion, religion doesn't not make man...It is the opium of the people"(3). Religion was employed effectively to control the black slaves in America. Teaching religion was considered as a moral duty by the whites. In the novel *Dred*, Harriet Beecher Stowe pinpoints how even the religious teaching differs. Certain sections of

The Holy Bible were not taught to the blacks, because they might start questioning their masters. She further states that:

That blessed book is a savor of life unto life when it's used right...The proper way is this: administer such portions only as these creatures are capable of understanding. This admirable system of religious instruction keeps the matter in our own hands, by allowing us to select for them such portions of the word as are best fitted to keep them quiet, dutiful and obedient. (201, 202)

Religion right from the days of the slavery was maintained as one of the modes through which the black slaves were punished and conditioned to respect and provide respect to the white community under any circumstances. A book consulted by every planter and slave holder during the times of slavery was the *Cotton Plantation Record and Account Book*, which provides account of their justification of slavery and the training of their slaves: "You will find that an hour devoted every Sabbath morning to their moral and religious instruction would prove a great aid to you in bringing about a better state of things amongst the Negroes." (85) And even after many years of political uprising and freedom, the black majority is forced to believe that prayer helps to bear all the pains and sufferings. Bearing the pain, the suffering and the fear accompanied to it is considered to be part of the black community while the white minority and even some of the black preachers who preach all these lead a happy and splendid life.

Religion, any religion it may be is found on the foundation of promoting love, peace and serving the people with qualities of humanity. Religions were initiated to serve God and to teach the common people aspects of humanity and knowledge to lead them in the right path. But Religion as such is not pure and at times is full of motives. People use religion to satisfy their needs. Baldwin writes in his, *The Fire next time*: "there was no love in the church. It was a mask for hatred and self – hatred and despair." (63) In *Go Tell It on the Mountains*, Gabriel recalls his memory of attending the Twenty – Four Elders Revival, a confluence of religious leaders, through which Baldwin expresses his disillusionment with the church and the worldly attitude of the religious persons, who are to serve the Lord, but they make religion a better business. Gabriel says,

He was not comfortable with these men – that was it – it was so different for him to accept them as his elders and betters in faith. They seemed to him so lax, so nearly worldly; they were not like those holy prophets of old who grew thin and naked in the service of the Lord. These God's ministers, had indeed grown fat, and their dress was rich and various...they did not give God, the

glory, nor count it as glory at all; Gabriel thought, highly paid circus – performers, each with their own special dazzling gift. (122)

Moreover, Baldwin describes how religion has been used by many religious men as a weapon to commit evil deeds and still enjoy a privilege of being a good and holy man in the society. Gabriel in the novel *Go Tell It on the Mountains* is the father of the protagonist, John Grimes. Gabriel, is the deacon of the Methodist church they are part of. He considers himself as a religious man, but serves as an example of how the hypocrisy of a religious man operates, just because of the fact that they are inclined towards religion. In the name of religion, people not able to satisfy their body needs succumb themselves to women to satisfy their needs.

Gabriel, in the novel *Go Tell It on the Mountains* talks about sin and punishment and calls himself the agent of God. However, he is more of a sinner than others. In the novel, Esther a serving girl in the nearby white family gets pregnant because of the illicit relationship with Gabriel. Gabriel, the so – called religious person is unable and unwilling to face the darker side of his own self. In the novel, months later when Esther tells him that she was pregnant with his child he was shocked and starts acting like a good man with a pure soul only to serve God. At first, Gabriel refused the child to be his own. But Esther was so adamant and sure about it. He did not want to leave his reputed life and a good woman like Dorothy for Esther. Though Gabriel repents to the God and asks for salvation, it can be said that he's just another man with human instincts, not a pure and holy man as he considers himself. He even considers Esther as a harlot and an evil woman sent by Satan to tempt him. Even after all these events, he makes sure his name and reputation among the religious community is not spoilt by the incident. Gabriel forces Esther to leave the town in order to maintain his reputation as a religious man. He tells her,

‘Girl,’ he said, ‘does you reckon I’m going to runoff and lead a life of sin with you somewhere, just because you tell me you got my baby kicking in your belly? How many kinds of a fool you think I am? I got God’s work to do – my life doesn’t belong to you. (151)

However, something similar happens with Elizabeth, his wife. Elizabeth was in a illegitimate relationship with Richard and through which she bears a baby, John. Subsequently, she's married to Gabriel. Gabriel considers John as a disgrace and always expresses hatred towards John. On an occasion, when John stands with his own son, he thinks, “The son of bondwoman stood where the rightful heir should stand.”(128) Gabriel, though he preaches love and caring to the society fails to do so in the same family, to his son.

Though Gabriel fails to provide him the respect he requires, he still emerges as the better son in the household, thus the disinherited child in the household stands to inherit the family's name and honour.

Moreover, in the novel Gabriel is intolerant towards the views of his family members and ill-treats them if they raise their voice against him. Moreover, he despises his wife Elizabeth, as well as Deborah, his first wife because in his eyes, they are fallen women. Gabriel the character is portrayed to be a religious person who is black with a white attitude. The American whites have the tendency or attitude to consider themselves superior to the other races, may it be blacks, the colored or the native red Indians. Robert Bone in his *Images of the Negro in American Literature*, says that Gabriel's attitude in the novel is white. "He thinks that he is immaculate, so to say "white," without a stain. If he is the saintly, the saved, the elected, then logically there must be the evil, which is the black." (70)

James Baldwin through the characters and incidents in the novel, brings forth not only the cultural segregation that is prevalent in America, but also how Religion has a major impact upon the life of the people.

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