

# Deficiency in the Family Education in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*: A Perspective of Original Family\*

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**Abstract**—Family education plays an important role in the physical and psychological development of children. The qualities of parents and husband-wife relationship deeply affect the parent-child relationship, and finally the result of family education. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* demonstrates the deficiency of family education under the twisted family relations, which produces irreversible damage to the development of their personality. From the perspective of family of origin, we can understand more about the adverse effects of improper family education brought about by the deformed family relations, and explore the possible solutions to these problems from the mother role and school education.

**Keywords**—family of origin; "*Go Tell It on the Mountain*"; family education

## I. INTRODUCTION

Parents are regarded as the children's first teachers, concerning their important roles in the family education. Good relations among family members are conducive to constructing a harmonious environment for children's growth and promoting the children's development in cognition, emotion, personality and sociality. Children growing up with proper family education will behave better than those brought up in poor families in school performances, comprehensive qualities, sociality and interpersonal relationship. Improper family education generally leads to poor academic achievements, immoral characters, over-caution and even many anti-social behaviors. Numerous studies have shown that the parents' original family is of great significance to the relationship between husband and wife and parent-child relationship, which in turn affects the result of family education.

Gabriel and his wife Elizabeth, leading characters in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* have been completely marginalized and discriminated for so long by the mainstream society. The influence of their families of origin and the tense family relations have serious impact on children's personality and social development, and the possible solutions is of significant value to families faced

with similar problems.

## II. THE ORIGINAL FAMILIES OF BLACK PARENTS

The structure of the black family is incomplete due to racial discrimination. Poor living environment and low economic and social status directly deprive black people of their own rights, with rights to education included, and further prevent the possibility of their improvement of their qualities and family education abilities. The education method of black family is simple and crude, and all the family education is inconsistent and fragmented.

According to Huang Hua, the most critical factor of original family, as the primary place for individuals to gain emotional experience, is the relationship between individuals and their parents (2006:85). Gabriel's native family was in tatters. His parents were slaves on the southern plantation. His father fled to the north very early. His mother Rachel raised him and his sister by washing for white people. He, as the apple of her mother's eye, was highly expected and used up the family's few resources. After the birth of Gabriel, "*he needed, therefore, meat, when there was any in the house, and clothes, whenever clothes could be bought,*" "*he needed the education that Florence desired far more than he*" (81). This made Florence, the eldest daughter, who wanted to change the present situation, felt unfair and made her hate his brother Gabriel even as an adult.

Gabriel became rather stubborn and disobedient under the over-indulgence of his mother. In addition to playing truant and upsetting his neighbors, Gabriel usually "*found himself in mud, in clay, in strange beds, and once or twice in jail*" in the morning (107). The only way for his mother, a former slave, to do that is to beat him up. Long lacking constraints by father, and in the spoiling of mother and in the envy, jealousy and even hatred of his sister, Gabriel became so cowardly, selfish and hypocritical that in the face of his illegitimate son, "he's scared to call his own" (100).

Elizabeth's family of origin is also in troubles. The relationship between her parents is not good, so is the relationship between her and her mother. Her mother died when she was eight or nine, who had been sick in bed for years before he died. She had little affection for her mother, let alone attachment. Elizabeth's attitude towards her father was the opposite, because he loved her very much. "*He told*

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her that she was the apple of his eye, that she was wound around his heartstrings, that she was surely the finest little lady in the land (176)". And she was in a very different mood with her father : she is proud and fearless. His father never gets angry with her. They are so close to each other that it can tolerate even a tiny displeasure.

When her mother died, however, her aunt deprived her father of custody, which was a disaster for her. Separation from her father meant separation from the deepest love in the world and from all her spiritual attachment. Her aunt did not love her, and the only reason for her to take her away is the fact that she was her sister's daughter. It's about responsibility. *"Her mother was dead, her father banished, and she lived in the shadow of her aunt (178)."*The influence of the disaster has been with Elizabeth all through her life.

As a child, Elizabeth lived in fear all the time, and finally it changed into anger. The fears made her love more about her father and hate more about her aunt, the woman who had taken all her love away from her. In Elizabeth's eyes, her aunt's love was *"a bribe, a threat, an indecent will to power"* (179), which was imprisonment in the name of love. Elizabeth's resentment against her father was contradictory. *"Her father had betrayed her: it was because he had not overturned the earth to take his daughter away from a woman who did not love her, and whom she did not love. (180)"*All these experience led Elizabeth to develop the character of being *"proud, and vain, and foolish"* (175), which can be regarded as reflections of the unhealed wounds.

### III. THE PREDICAMENT IN BLACK FAMILY'S EDUCATION

Parents' living state of a family has strong influence on the quality of family education, so is harmonious family relations. The role of Gabriel as a husband and father is a failure from the perspective of conflicting relations with his wife and his two sons.

#### A. Tense Relations Between the Husband and Wife

Gabriel and his wife Elizabeth had been divorced before they got married with each other again. Gabriel's first wife Debora had been gang-raped by whites before their marriage. His lover Esther died in the birth of Royal. After marriage, Elizabeth had once attached her future dream to her former husband Richard, but Richard's suicide led her to bringing up her child and affording the duty of whole family.

*"The emotional and economic support from the families of origin have strong influence on the quality of marriage (Yuan Xiaojiao & Fang Xiaoyi, 2016: 498), and black family lacks the support from the families of origin. What is worse, the parents are busy with living, which means little time and attention paid to the education of children. Gabriel has to work extra hours in a factory, whose salary as a preacher cannot support the whole family. He has to "shovel snow in zero weather" (25). The extreme harsh living conditions have a seriously negative impact on the personality development of children.*

The change in the face of the mother Elizabeth demonstrates the misery of this family. Before John was

born, Elizabeth, despite the pain of life, was able to maintain a better face: *young and proud, uplifted, with a smile that made the wide mouth beautiful and glowed in the enormous eyes" (24). After ten years, the face has become as follows: "the dark, hard lines running downward from her eyes, and the deep, perpetual scowl in her forehead, and the downturned, tightened mouth, and the strong, thin, brown, and bony hands"(24).*The contrast terrified John, and even made him hate his mother.

Gabriel and Elizabeth's relationship is not in harmony, with unequal status as husband and wife. Gabrielle doesn't allow Elizabeth to go to the movies, go shopping, or even make friends. Besides, in John's opinion, his father always blamed his mother for all the mistakes. It's mother's fault for being late for church, *"because she could not seem to get herself and the children ready on time (13)"* or she *"hadn't yet risen to fix his father's breakfast" (19).* This reflects the double disadvantages of black women in the family and society. The tragedies about Gabriel, who is a tragic himself, is that he only quarrels and takes his emotions out on more disadvantaged family members.

The living state of parents reflects that of the whole family: poverty, low status, high economic pressure and tense relations between husband and wife. Black parents are limited by their own quality to adopt corresponding strategies to cope with the growing-up problems of children.

#### B. The Failure of Gabriel as the Father

The conversation between Roy and John and their mother (24 - 28) reveals the tense relations in the black family: the father is controlling, Roy hates his father, and John is afraid and suspicious of his father. Beating and cursing are Gabriel's way of expressing love and maintaining his authority, reflecting the failure of his father role. John's frailty and Roy's insolence are obviously the result of black parents' ineptitude.

Gabriel's education as a father is bound to be ineffective. His stepson John and his own son Roy were both full of hatred and hostility to him as a direct result of abusive parenting style. *"he don't never let me talk to him like I talk to you? ... But he don't never listen to me" (27),* which reflects that Gabriel education towards children is typically authoritarian, even for Roy, the apple of his eye, and the powerlessness of his mother Rachel in bringing him up seems to fall on him. Gabriel's dislike of John is so profound that he even doubts himself. John also hated his father in his heart, cursed his father and even wanted to kill him. During the process of growing up, what John lacks is not only his biological father, but also his father's love.

#### C. The Rebellious Consciousness of Black Sons

Roy's injury was a crisis in the black family, a vivid representation of the sons' growing up. Roy was stabbed, an obvious fault of Roy, but father was angry on John. To John, *"his face caused John to stiffen instantly with malice and fear" (48).*It was *"a kind of wild, weeping terror... and yet at the same time unutterably older and more cruel.(48)"* When John and his father looked at each other, John gained a

strange sense of victory, who even expects Roy to die to reduce his father's authority. His intelligence, the recognition from the white, contempt for god, and even the death of his brother have become his weapons against his father. During the quarrel, Gabriel hit Elizabeth in the face with all his might. Seeing his mother beaten, Roy cursed Gabriel and challenged his authority, although the result was fierce beating.

John and Roy's rebellious consciousness reflected their male consciousness and stimulated their imagination of their father's role in the future. It is because of their conflict and dissatisfaction with their father that they begin to have expectations towards their own family. *"When I have children I ain't going to treat them like this"* (27), said Roy. After John got a small pile of money from his mother as his birthday present, he went to the road, saw a horse, and imagined his future home: *his house, great and rambling and very new, and in the kitchen his wife, a beautiful woman, made breakfast, and the smoke rose out of the chimney, melting into the morning air* (39).

#### IV. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO THE PREDICAMENT

In addition to John's own intelligence, school education and partial recognition of the white world, as well as Elizabeth's love for John, have become an important guarantee for John's smooth growth in the family education.

##### A. Education Significance of Maternal Love

The maternal love from Elizabeth is not only the premise of education, but also has therapeutic significance for trauma. In the tense family relations and harsh living reality, Elizabeth sets up a model of mother-child relationship based on love, trust and respect, and built a shelter for the growth of black children.

Roy was full of attachment to his mother. He could call his mother *"old lady"* (26). He snuggled up to his mother and said he had her to turn to when he was in trouble. John and his mother loved each other. Though the little maternal love was poor for financial and personal reasons was often divided up. *"Each time the swelling began...she became a little more of a stranger herself"* (11). The root cause of John's fear is the extremely scarce love from his mother, which indirectly reflects his dependence on his mother.

When John asked whether his father is a good man, the mother responded *"in astonishment as her mouth tightened and her eyes grew dark"* (26). This reflects Gabriel failure to fulfill his husband's and father's responsibilities. However, despite her dissatisfaction with his husband, Elizabeth is still very careful to maintain his image in the hearts of children, which shows that Elizabeth is basically qualified as a wife.

John inherited Elizabeth's father's *"gentleness, and the trick of his laugh"* (177), and his father's extremely strong self-esteem, which was a weapon against other people's contempt. Elizabeth projected her love and even attachment for her father on John and even became emotionally dependent on him. *"You're going to be a mighty fine man, You know that? Your mama's counting on you"* (35).

On the whole, the relatively harmonious relationship between mother and children lies in that the mother can still respect and understand the children despite the hard life and allow the children to express themselves freely. Elizabeth would assign housework to the children, although Roy disdained and John felt heavy, they still chose to follow (28-29). On his birthday, after John finished his part of housework, his mother gave him a small pile of money, which John could spend freely to buy anything he wanted. John felt *"his heart broke and he wanted to put his head on her belly where the wet spot was, and cry* (35)".

##### B. Significance of School Education

In their children's education, black parents gain little social support, among which the most important is from schools. School education played an important role in the development of John's self-awareness and became an important part in making up for the defects of family education. At the age of fourteen, John decided never to be his father, nor like his father's fathers. He wanted a different life. What motivated him is his being smart and being accepted in school. *"John was expected to be good, to be a good example. (14)"*, *"John excelled in school,... and it was said that he had a Great Future. He might become a Great Leader of His People."*(21)The recognition alone is strong enough to support his change psychologically.

The first person to praise John was a white woman, the headmistress. Therefore, encouragement from teachers and recognition from the white society are the keys to John's growth. In essence, it is the strength of education in school that partially offsets the negative character of education in family. In the confrontation between father and son, the recognition from the school gives him a shield, a weapon, and strength to save and improve himself. This self-identification was his weapon against his father. His father's beatings made him cry, his father's voice made him tremble, but his father could not win all, for he had something beyond his father's power, that is, hatred and wisdom. John's hatred of god and religion stems in part from that of his father, because his father represents god. In this sense, opposing god became his tool against his father. (cf. 8-10)

#### V. CONCLUSION

John finally converted to Christianity at the age of 14, which can be regarded as the result of the whole family and community education. John's conversion was somewhat inevitable. As a preacher's son, John must be strongly influenced by Christianity. In addition, his mother's expectation that the children can obtain self-protection through religion obviously takes effect. Despite John's instinctive distrust of Christianity, the scenes of morning services and his love for Elisha prevented him from being completely cut off from it. As an essential part of family life and family education, the conversion to Christianity reflected the profound influence of his parents and community have on John.

Black people, like other marginalized and underprivileged groups, are typically disadvantaged. As a

masterpiece of black literature in the 1950s, *Go Tell it on the Mountain* reflects the quandaries of black people from many aspects. Black parents, faced with the harsh living environment and huge economic pressure, are struggling in carrying out the family education. Besides, black parents, who themselves have few opportunities to receive education, cannot gain corresponding guidance and support from the society, so they were destined to face more challenges.

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