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BLACK LIVES HAVE ALWAYS MATTERED!
TWO PROTEST NOVELS OF VIOLENCE, INEQUALITY AND
OPRESSION: *NATIVE SON* AND *GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN*

Siyah Hayatlar Her Zaman Önemli Olmuştur! Şiddet, Eşitsizlik ve Baskı
İçerikli İki Protest Roman: *Native Son* ve *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

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Abstract

Due to the secondary position given to the persons of African descent throughout their history, it could reasonably be argued that violence, inequality, and oppression have been deeply rooted in the United States of America for centuries. Thus, for many literary critics such as Trudier Harris (2019), all writings of Black people in one way or another have been different forms of protest against the racial prejudices of the dominant white community. Accordingly, the intention of protest literature has always been to point out inequalities and oppression among different socio-economic groups and to call for reform. This study seeks to explore how, although written a generation apart, Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) are two canonical protest novels which vocalize the racial issues that the black community had to face in the mid-20th century in the United States of America in similar ways.

Keywords: American Protest Literature, Violence, Inequality, Racial Prejudices, Systematic Racism

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Öz

Afrika kökenli insanlara tarih boyunca verdikleri ikincil konum nedeniyle, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde yüzyıllarca şiddet, eşitsizlik ve baskının derinden kök saldığı haklı olarak iddia edilebilir. Bu nedenle, Trudier Harris (2019) gibi birçok edebiyat eleştirmeni için, siyah halkın tüm yazdıkları bir şekilde baskın beyaz toplumun ırksal önyargılarına karşı farklı protesto biçimleridir. Buna uygun olarak da protest edebiyatının amacı her zaman farklı sosyo-ekonomik gruplar arasındaki eşitsizlik ve baskılara işaret etmek ve reform çağrısı yapmak olmuştur. Bu çalışmada, Richard Wright'ın *Native Son* (1940) ve James Baldwin'ın *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) isimli eserlerinin, her ne kadar bir nesil zaman farkı ile yazılmış olsalar da iki kanonik protest roman olarak 20. yüzyılın ortalarında siyahi toplumun karşılaştığı ırkçı meseleleri nasıl benzer şekillerde dile getirdiklerini keşfetmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Amerikan Protest Edebiyatı, Şiddet, Eşitsizlik, Irksal Önyargılar, Sistemik Irkçılık

“The scars and stains of racism are still deeply embedded in American society.” (John Lewis, 2018)

“I can't breathe. I can't breathe. George Floyd's last words. But they didn't die with him. They're still being heard. They're echoing across this nation.”

(Joe Biden, 2019)

Introduction

Violence, inequality, and oppression have been deeply rooted in the United States of America for centuries due to the secondary position given to the people of African descent throughout their history. The origins of protest undoubtedly stem from the slave history and the culture of feudal plantations in the United States before the Emancipation Proclamation (1863). The impacts of the practice of slavery have been felt and may continue to be felt throughout U.S. history; for instance, John Lewis, an American politician and civil rights leader, in one of his speeches in 2018 makes clear that “*the scars and stains of racism are still deeply embedded in American society*” (Quoted in Baker, 2018). Thus, it would be possible to argue that all writings of Black people in one way or another have been different forms of protest against racial prejudice and inequality. Trudier Harris, an American literary and cultural critic, defines protest as “*the practice within African American literature of*

bringing redress to the secondary status of black people, of attempting to achieve the acceptance of black people into the larger American body politic, of encouraging practitioners of democracy truly to live up to what democratic ideals on American soil mean" (2019). In other words, the intention of protest literature has always been to point out racial inequalities and oppression among different socio-economic groups in American society. Hence, protest writing, whatever its form in literature, will continue to call for reform and thus remain to be an integral part of the African American literary landscape (Ogbaa, 1991: p. 159; Saul, 2009: p. 405). When W. E. B. Du Bois asserts in 1926 in "Criteria of Negro Art," he seems to prophesy the need to vocalize the issues related to racial discrimination in all kinds of art:

"Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent" (Du Bois 1994: p. 66).

Like Du Bois, Richard Wright famously tells James Baldwin that "*All literature is protest. You can't name a single novel that isn't protest,*" but Baldwin defiantly replies, "*All literature might be protest but all protest was not literature*" (1968: p. 157). This exchange takes place after the publication of Baldwin's essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel," (1949) which criticizes Wright's *Native Son* for its lack of craftsmanship, in other words, artistic expression (Kim, 1974: p. 387). The different historical times in which the two novelists lived, their upbringing and home environments, and their social and religious philosophies all influence the tone and tenor of their protests, thus their characters and novelistic worlds. In his novel *Native Son* (1940), Richard Wright (1908-1960) provides a very personal view of the challenges and struggles growing up as an impoverished black boy in the United States in the first half of the 20th century touching on concepts like racism and inequality in a way that is forthright and personal. We see a similar personal view of what it was like to grow up as an impoverished black boy in the United States in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) by James Baldwin (1924-1987). This paper seeks to explore how, although written a generation apart, by Richard Wright's *Native Son* and James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* are two canonical protest novels which vocalize the issues of inequality, oppression, violence and systematic racism that the black community had to face in the mid-20th-century in the United States of America in similar ways.

In *Native Son*, the sound of the alarm clock presented in the first lines of the story not only wakes Bigger Thomas and his family but symbolically rouses an entire nation to witness the fear and frustration that centuries of racism have wrought on a young black man and his whole race. From the very beginning, it is clear that 20-year-old Bigger Thomas is scarcely given the chance to realize his identity, let alone

his longings and his aspirations. He is physically restricted to one area where all black people are forced to live as wealthy real estate barons, like Mr. Dalton, refuse to allow blacks to rent apartments in predominantly white neighborhoods, which leads to overpopulation and artificially high rents in the black South Side. As J. Lee Greene informs us, by the late 1930s in African-American literature, the South is used as a symbol of the intensified racism that afflicted the lives of blacks during the Depression and its aftermath (1991: p. 301). Accordingly, when the story proceeds, the reader learns that black people are also forced to work long hours as maids, cooks, cleaning women, and chauffeurs. Even the few beneficiaries of a higher standard of education have difficulty finding work since they are competing with whites. Under such conditions, it is impossible not to be full of frustration as well as shame. In that sense, Wright seems to be calling attention to the fact that although African-Americans are not slaves anymore, still they are enslaved by the living conditions that the dominant white people impose upon them.

After this clear initial statement of his position, Wright employs much foreshadowing to prepare the reader for the climactic murders in the novel. For example, in an early scene, Bigger repeatedly expresses a fear to his friend Gus that one day he will commit some terrible act: “*it ain’t like something going to happen to me. It’s ... It’s like I was going to do something I can’t help...*” (*Native Son*, p. 52). Likewise, his mother repeats her concern that his son Bigger might end up in jail if he does not stop “*running with that gang of yours [his friends]*” (*Native Son*, p. 39). On an atmospheric note, the rat-infested, one-room flat Bigger and his family live in, the humiliating living conditions in which others are frequently depicted, the hatred and anger his behavior and speech frequently reflect, all conspire to indicate some horrible deed is imminent. Hence, it is easily predicted that the upcoming events in the novel will shockingly disturb the reader through the acts of excessive violence and scenes too painful, too frightening, and too unpleasant to read.

The first scene, for instance, in the novel where Bigger Thomas causes his sister to faint, by waving a freshly-caught rat at her (*Native Son*, p. 37) is significant in that it shows his readiness to commit acts both unsavory and misogynistic. Thus, his accidental suffocating to death of Mary Dalton, in fear of being caught by Mrs. Dalton in Mary’s room (*Native Son*, p. 117), and later decapitation of her with a nearby hatchet so that her body would fit through the furnace opening (*Native Son*, p. 123), become the monstrous yet logical developments of a character who has been ripped of his humanity even before he was born. Likewise, later in the novel, his rape of his current girlfriend Bessie (*Native Son*, p. 264) — who suspects him of having done something to Mary and eventually learns the truth — his hitting her on the head with a brick several times (*Native Son*, p. 267) and throwing her through a window (*Native Son*, p. 269), are shocking more for being the results of a terrible social injustice on an entire people than for being the cruelty of an isolated individual. In the

end, Bigger pays for his crimes in the electric chair shocking America by waking it to the ravages of centuries-old racism that produced Bigger Thomas.

Wright depicts Bigger Thomas and his motivations in a manner typical of literary naturalism, generally described as a movement commonly preoccupied with victims of overwhelming natural, social, political, and economic forces. The writer carefully prepares the reader to understand that Bigger Thomas is doomed even before the story unfolds because he cannot control the forces that shaped him and continue to control him. The dehumanizing conditions in which Bigger Thomas and his family are obliged to live, along with the other black people in the United States, are graphically portrayed from the outset, and the author's agenda thereby clearly and forcefully proclaimed throughout. Thus too the depiction of Thomas's double murder — of the white Mary Dalton and the black Bessie — though certainly grisly and inhuman, is in a sense justified as the consequence of the social brutalization Wright wishes to indict. The Jewish lawyer Max, in the lengthy concluding scene, elucidates the theme and seems to vindicate the hero with a speech explaining how Bigger Thomas' murders are rooted in the history of black people in the United States of America as can be seen below:

“Before this trial, the newspapers and the prosecution said that this boy had committed other crimes. It is true. He is guilty of numerous crimes. But search until the Day of Judgment, and you will find not one shred of evidence of them. He has murdered many times, but there are no corpses. Let me explain. This Negro boy's entire attitude toward life is a crime! The hate and fear which we have inspired in him, woven by our civilization into the very structure of his consciousness, into his blood and bones, into the hourly functioning of his personality, have become the justification of his existence” (*Native Son*, p. 426).

In his essay “Everybody's Protest Novel,” Baldwin describes *Native Son* as a piece of work through “*the pages of which hatred smoulders like Sulphur fire*” (1955: p. 33) as all of Bigger's life is controlled, defined by his hatred and his fear which drives him to murder and even rape. It is clear that the American reader was not ready for such an unprecedented depiction of racial tensions and their consequences. It appears that the novel asks the readers to understand the roots of Bigger's hatreds, but it does not expect them to approve of them. The novel is grisly and heavy-handed and forceful in its portrayal of the consequences of inequalities the blacks have to live with: as Irving Howe, an important American literary and social critic argued in 1963: “*The day Native Son appeared, American culture was changed forever*” (pp. 353-68). In other words, after *Native Son*, it was no longer possible to pretend that the history of racial oppression was a legacy from which White Americans could emerge without suffering an enduring penalty. On the contrary, the novel holds every individual responsible for the scars and stains of dehumanizing as well as subjugating black Americans.

Some others condemned the book because of its lack of aesthetics and its content as a protest novel and even as a political document for the promotion of the author's communist ideology. In her essay "The Politics of Poetics: Ideology and Narrative Form in *An American Tragedy* and *Native Son*," Barbara Foley informs us that Wright attended meetings of the John Reed Club in 1932, which was associated with the Communist Party and after establishing a relationship with several party members, Wright formally joined the Communist Party in late 1933 and as a revolutionary poet wrote many proletarian poems (Foley, 1993: p. 190; Gibson, 2001: p. 448). Foley describes *Native Son* as "a black proletarian novel of the 1930s" which "constitutes an instance of an apologue, in that its structure functions primarily to enhance the reader's awareness of the determining social conditions that generate the protagonist's fate" (1993: p. 191). Hence, it appears that Bigger Thomas, representing the limitations that society placed on African-Americans, could win his own agency and self-knowledge only by committing wicked crimes.

Some other critics claim that *Native Son* is limited in both its artistic value and its understanding of the human character. For instance, in his "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949), Baldwin questions the credibility and complexity of Wright's characters finding the novel too melodramatic and sees its main character Bigger Thomas, as a "symbolical monster" (1955: p. 42). It is interesting that in the early stages of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, he seeks encouragement from Wright but later Baldwin seems to feel the urge "to rebel against his literary father" (1989: p. 218) as Bernard W. Bell puts it. In his essay, Baldwin claims that both *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Native Son*, as the protest novels, are characterized by "its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended" (1955: p. 313). In the same essay, Baldwin also highlights how the canonized novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* glazed over the truth and the reality of slavery. According to Baldwin, author Harriet Beecher Stowe created and constructed black characters according to her standards and taste, which left them as mere servants who had no right or means to alter their social status; therefore, while the novel was supposed to reveal the reality of American slavery, it cannot but fail in this purpose, since it actually rejects that reality. Likewise, portrayed as devoid of his humanity because of his color and background, Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* is turned into a monster who embodies the black man's fear, hatred, and anger directed against the white society.

As Irving Howe observes, "Like all attacks launched by young writers against their famous elders, Baldwin's essays were also a kind of announcement of his own intentions," (1963: pp. 353-68) which is not an unprecedented event in the history of literature. In *Uncle Tom's Children* (1936), Wright protests against the contents of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in which the protagonist, Uncle Tom, is given as a servile and docile role model to imitate for blacks. Thus, both novelists, Wright and Baldwin, try to illuminate the shared experience of black

Americans in their own ways. While the former's naturalistic approach to the life and death of Bigger Thomas is political, the latter's emphasis in his first novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is more spiritual and psychological. By drawing on personal issues with his step-father, Baldwin registers his own protest against not only race matters but also homosexuality and religion via his central character, John Grimes, in his own way (Porter, 2007: pp. 53-69). When the novel was published in 1953, just like Wright's *Native Son*, it gained immediate popularity, establishing Baldwin as one of the keenest observers of the racial situation in the United States.

Briefly, in the novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, the reader follows the semi-autobiographical story of a young man's coming-of-age repressed by his father's religious fundamentalism and its puritanical regime. Born in Harlem, New York, to his mother, Emma Berdis Joynes, and a father he never knew, Baldwin grew up with a minister stepfather who adopted him and was the oldest of nine children. Similarly, his novel starts with the story of John Grimes, a young African-American boy, in Harlem in the 1930s. As the story proceeds, the reader learns that John has been brought up by his mother Elizabeth and her preacher husband Gabriel, who is known as John's father. Gabriel is portrayed as a character who is a strict disciplinarian, abusing both his wife and his children, especially the protagonist, Johnny. The characters are members of the Temple of the Fire-Baptized Church in Harlem, a Pentecostal Protestant denomination. It is significant that through dialogue and character description, each section allows the reader to understand the thought processes of each character and possible motivations for particular actions. The complexity and the variety of characters presented in the novel aim to achieve what Baldwin, as mentioned earlier, felt was lacking, overstated, or at least poorly attempted in Wright's *Native Son*.

The novel seems to scrutinize the function of the Christian Church in the lives of African-Americans not only as a source of repression but also as an example of moral hypocrisy. The members of the church, who might objectively be supposed to be enlightened and better motivated, are not depicted as such. As Jasmin J. Vann also points out, Baldwin displays what happens when people use their religion to avoid dealing with their demons and issues of the past (2011: p. 30). To illustrate, the section called *Gabriel's Prayer* begins with a description of Gabriel as a drunk and womanizing teenager before his career as a preacher. It is significant to highlight that he becomes a deacon; yet, he is prejudiced against white people as a man who is victimized and burdened by the sins of his past. One of his sins is to have a brief affair with a woman named Esther while married to Deborah. After he ends the affair out of guilt, he learns that Esther is pregnant, which forces him to steal his wife's savings so that Esther can give birth to her baby far away. However, when Esther manages to go to Chicago, she cannot survive during the childbirth, and her son, Royal, is then raised by his grandparents in the South. Ironically, Royal knows his father but is unaware of his blood-tie to him, and is killed in a knife fight in Chicago,

where his mother had also died. On the other hand, before her death, Deborah reveals that she knew that Royal was her husband's son from the beginning and rebukes Gabriel for abandoning Esther and his son. Upon Deborah's death, Gabriel as a bitter black Southerner goes north — to New York, like Baldwin's own stepfather — to start a new life as a man of God. In all, Baldwin contrasts the attitudes of two generations and the realities of two ways of life by showing what happens to a family that moved from the rural Southland to the Northern ghettos.

Like Baldwin, Wright displays a critical attitude towards Christian religion in *Native Son*. To understand the personal motive behind his criticism, it would be useful to look into his own life in which he felt “*stifled by his aunt and grandmother, who tried to force him to pray that he might find God,*” which seems to leave him with “*a permanent, uncompromising hostility toward religious solutions to everyday problems*” as Caryl Phillips informs us in the introduction to Wright's *Native Son* (2000: p. xvi). Thus, one cannot help noticing the similarity between Wright and his protagonist, Bigger Thomas, who does not believe in religion or God. From Bigger's point of view, unlike Gabriel Grimes in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, religion is only one way of dealing with the injustice and inequality black people face, the dehumanizing conditions they are forced to live under as described in detail earlier. This is the main reason why at the end of the novel, Bigger refuses to take the cross offered by the local black preacher who comes to see him right after he is caught (*Native Son*, p. 316). Bigger cannot help staring unblinkingly at the Preacher whose “*words registered themselves in his consciousness. He knew without listening to what they meant; it was the voice of his mother telling of suffering, of hope, of love beyond this world. And he loathed it because it made him feel as condemned and guilty as the voice of those who hated him*” (*Native Son*, p. 313). The reader can frequently observe Biblical allusions throughout the novel, yet these allusions do not serve as an uplifting component of Bigger Thomas's life. Instead, Wright displays a strong sense of irony in his approach to the Bible: through Bigger who is exposed to Christianity, through his poor mother whom he is ashamed of, and through Reverend Hammond, a Catholic priest whose words have no power on him.

In both novels, there is a direct criticism of the white ruling class in the United States of America. In *Native Son*, Mr. Dalton, a multimillionaire who wants to give Bigger Thomas a job in order to give him a chance to earn a living despite his having attended a reform school, is also, however, a partner to the estate agency that rents rat-infested flats to black people at double the standard rent (*Native Son*, pp. 84 – 87). Here Wright is highly critical of a hypocritical upper class which on the one hand attempts to ameliorate the negative effects of discrimination against African Americans, while on the other is the very reason why black people live like slaves in the first place. Therefore, Wright seems to be commenting on the hypocrisy of the rich by showing how Bigger accidentally murders Mary Dalton. Neither the Dalton Family including Mary nor her communist boyfriend Jan sees clearly that

they and Bigger inhabit two different worlds — that they know too little about each other. Accordingly, as several critics such as Robert A. Bone (1968: pp. 140-152) and Edward Margolies (1969: pp. 65-86) have already pointed out, Mrs. Dalton's blindness becomes a central image in the novel since Mrs. Dalton is literally blind but at the same time, like her husband, she is also metaphorically blind to Bigger's social reality. Bigger in return is similarly blinded by his hatred and fear for whiteness, which is the overwhelming, hostile, and controlling force that imprisons him in a world of almost no choices. Hence, this blindness prevents both Bigger and the Daltons from seeing each other as individual human beings, thus condemning them to mere racial stereotypes (Nagel, 2007: pp. 92-96).

Wright calls attention not simply to the inequality between white and black people but also their reciprocal hatred. For instance, after Bigger flees to save his life, masses of white people start searching for him. As Bigger Thomas reads in the newspaper, the reader learns that there have been some attempts to lynch one or two young black boys who bear a resemblance to Bigger Thomas. Wright's own uncle was lynched in front of his eyes, which likely initiated Wright's lifelong contemplation of the constant threat of death haunting black men (Twagilimana and Sublette, 2011: p. 322). Moreover, many black people are fired from their jobs on the grounds that they might murder or rape somebody in the family. As in his work, "The American South: The Continuity of Self-Definition," Louis D. Rubin informs us, the incidence of lynching the black people was high in the 1880s and 1890s and declined during the 20th century when lynching was excused rather than advocated (1991, p. 8). Until the years of World War II and afterward, fears of increased black criminality and degeneration continued to result in lynching, racist exclusion and black alienation, which seem to feed one another. Famous American literary icon, Mark Twain (1835-1910) also writes of lynching as a "*mania, a fashion; a fashion which will spread wider and wider, year by year, covering state after state, as with an advancing disease*" (Quoted in Sundquist, 1991: p. 123).

Wright's novel, which reflects the consequences of such intense reciprocal hatred, was criticized for its concentration on excessive violence and hatred between whites and blacks. For Wright and his African-American contemporaries, the modernist themes such as alienation, exclusion, fragmentation, despair, and apocalyptic doom, as well as the naturalistic idea of determinism, were part of the forces that had embodied their lives. Thus, as already mentioned earlier, Bigger Thomas is presented as a product of his environment, a native son of a racist America that has closed all doors of opportunity for him, originally from the Deep South, but now living in a northern urban setting, the poor, lowly ghetto of South Side Chicago. However, Bigger is a boy with aspirations, dreams and yearnings as clear in his wish to fly a plane in one of the earlier scenes: "*I could fly one of them things if I had a chance*" (*Native Son*, p. 46). His friend Gus also agrees that Bigger could, but only if he had some money and were not black. In the same scene, it is clear that Bigger does not see

white people as individuals, but as an oppressive force stopping them from realizing their dreams, as clear in his words: “*They don’t let us do nothing*” (*Native Son*, p. 49). His perception of the white people seems to be the result of subjugation and slavery blacks have experienced for centuries.

One can observe a similar attitude in Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. For instance, in the section entitled *The Seventh Day*, John wanders through the streets of New York and experiences the scorn of white people because of the color of his skin and the hostility of the urban environment as the narrator relates: “*He remembered the people he had seen in that city, whose eyes held no love for him. And he thought of their feet so swift and brutal, and the dark grey clothes they wore, and how when they passed they did not see him, or, if they saw him, they smirked*” (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*, p. 38). Likewise, in the section called *Gabriel’s Prayer*, as the narrator informs the reader, Gabriel walks through town threatened by the hostility of the urban environment as the white men watch him and apart from himself, there were no black men on the streets at all (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*, p. 163). In his work, *Grand Illusions: American Art and the First World War*, David M. Lubin informs us that in 1919 Henry Johnson, an American World War I soldier, was applauded by whites for his heroism and his killing the Germans (2018: p. 257). However, as Lubin further asserts, at the same time, sixty-three of his fellow African Americans who were still in uniform were lynched for alleged violence against whites (2018: p. 258). In his novel, Baldwin describes the aftermath of one of the lynchings in the section entitled *Gabriel’s Prayer* as below:

“*There had been found that morning, just outside of town, the dead body of a soldier, his uniform shredded where he had been flogged, and, turned upward through the black skin, raw, red meat. He lay face downward at the base of a tree, his fingernails digging into the scuffed earth. When he was turned over, his eyeballs stared upward in amazement and horror, his mouth was locked open wide; his trousers, soaked with blood, were torn open, and exposed to the cold, white air of morning the thick hairs of his groin, matted together, black and rust-red, and the wound that seemed to be throbbing still. He had been carried home in silence and lay now behind locked doors, with his living kinsmen, who sat, weeping, and praying, and dreaming of vengeance, and waiting for the next visitation. Now, someone spat on the sidewalk at Gabriel’s feet, and he walked on, his face not changing, and he heard it reprovingly whispered behind him that he was a good nigger, surely up to no trouble*” (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*, p. 164)

As also seen in the quote above, the white man is portrayed as, prejudiced, hostile and violent, capable of committing an atrocity. John Grimes grows up listening to his father’s opinion of the white man. They are described as “*wicked,*” “*never to be trusted,*” “*told nothing but lies*” and “*cheated them of their wages, and burned them, and shot them*” (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*, p. 41). As the narrator also relates, John also has “*read about colored men being burned in the electric chair for things*

they had not done ... how they were tortured in prisons” (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*, p.41). Not only does Baldwin call attention to the violent treatment of black people but also he points out the judicial injustice in the legal system in mid-20th century America. Recently, John Paull in his article, “The Use of Lethal Force by Police in the USA: Mortality Metrics of Race and Disintegration (2015-2019)” reveals the current judicial aspects of racism in the United States, according to which police brutality and violence is a result of systemic racism (2019: pp.30-35).

The section entitled *Elizabeth’s Prayer* justifies Gabriel’s opinions of white people when the reader learns that Deborah was gang-raped as a teenager by a band of white men and afterward condemned by both blacks and whites. After observing that even all the elderly preachers despise her as a woman, Gabriel immediately decides to marry her (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*, p. 218). Elizabeth, on the death of her mother, is placed by court order in the care of a cold, imperious aunt although as a young girl she is very fond of her father (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*, p. 177). Then she goes to New York with her boyfriend Richard, who is presented as a self-educated “sinner” who does not believe in the Church and who never carried out his promise to marry Elizabeth (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*, p. 190). One day Richard gets arrested for a robbery he did not commit. Baldwin’s criticism of the abusive manner of the white police officers is clear in the following lines: “*Then Richard shouted: ‘But I wasn’t there! Look at me, goddammit – I wasn’t there!’ ‘You black bastards,’ the man said, looking at him, ‘you’re all the same’*” (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*, p.199). Although Richard does not get convicted due to the lack of evidence, he is driven to suicide on his first night home as he cannot get over the feelings of shame and humiliation during his time at the police station (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*, p. 202). As is clear from the aforementioned examples, Baldwin, like Wright, once more seems to be dealing with racial matters through the demonstration of violence, judicial injustices and hatred along with the religious hypocrisy.

Both Bigger Thomas and Gabriel Grimes serve as native sons of American society and are opposite to the old stereotypical view of the black man in mainstream American literature as a childish, lazy, subservient, innocent, and sentimental being. Unlike Uncle Tom, Bigger is a rebel, a grown-up Tom, who rejects victimization. After Wright published *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1936) and read its reviews, he concluded, as he wrote in “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” that he “*had made an awfully naïve mistake: I found that I had written a book which even bankers’ daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears*” (*Native Son*, p. 23). To achieve this goal, Wright utilized a combination of literary and philosophical traditions to portray the main character, Bigger Thomas: naturalism and existentialism. Thus, as perverse as his crimes are, he uses them to create himself and force acknowledgment by a

society that has denied him true existence. Existentialism, particularly Jean-Paul Sartre's version, contends that a person becomes his or her action, that existence precedes essence and that a man becomes what he does. Therefore, such disparate features as reason, the Church, and society or community may well be parts of an individual's life, but they should not dictate his existence. Bigger Thomas's accidental killing of Mary Dalton sets him on a journey to self-discovery by rendering him aware of the precariousness of his existence. Even though his life was previously very precarious, his perverse actions make him intensely aware of his existence. His life becomes a succession of tense moments, each being potentially the last one of his life. His flight is just reflective of his anguish. Everything threatens his survival, and he deals with it accordingly. His manipulation of the Daltons and the police, Bessie Mears, the ransom plot: all these dealings are specific moments in Bigger's new intense life. Thus, too, he asserts that he was responsible for his actions and through this, he finally experiences free will and reaches personal freedom.

In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, fourteen-year-old John Grimes, described as dubious, fearful and bitter, is about to walk the path to salvation in the company of his father, mother, Aunt Florence and the elder saints of the church in Harlem in 1935. As made clear at the novel's opening, there are high expectations of John, "Everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father" (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*, p. 11). After the service starts, while John is writing for mercy on the threshing floor before the altar, ironically all the secrets of his relatives are uncovered one by one through their stories. Before the service, the reader learns that John feels doomed and keeps dreaming of escape since he already has made up his mind not to be "like his father or like his father's father" (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*, p. 21). John seems to desire to be a new kind of African-American, unlike Bigger Thomas or Gabriel Grimes, in other words, native sons of America. He does not wish to be like either his father's fathers who were slaves or Gabriel who was enslaved by the living conditions in a racist land. John would like to lead another life in which he achieves freedom at as progressive a level as he could and dare to enter the forbidden world inside the New York Public Library, "a world of corridors and marble steps" that was intimidating for a boy from Harlem (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*, p. 42). Wright also comments on that new generation of blacks who deserve equal racial status, good education, sufficient food and respectable jobs as clear in his words in *Uncle Tom's Children*: "That post-civil war household word among Negroes — 'He's an Uncle Tom!' — which donated reluctant toleration for the cringing type who knew his place before white folk, has been supplanted by a new word from a new generation which says — 'Uncle Tom is dead!'" (1936/2004)

In the section entitled, *The Seventh Day*, yearning for racial equality, John Grimes can identify with the blond young man described as "the fool of his family" on a movie poster he comes by in his walk to the movie houses (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*, p. 43). Obviously, John, like Bigger Thomas, is full of hopes, aspirations,

and dreams and at the same time, desires white man's skin, bloneness, and undoubtedly his privileges. When John watches the movie of the poster he sees, the wicked woman in the film, "blonde and pasty white" fascinates him with the way she behaves as well as how she looks (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*, p. 44). As the narrator retells, "nothing tamed her or broke her, nothing touched her, neither kindness, nor scorn, nor hatred, nor love" and "John wanted to be like her, only more powerful, more thorough and more cruel" (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*, p. 45). The underlying theme in the novel entails a search for identity which essentially leads to one's ideal as Vann also highlights (2011: p. 27). Ironically, at the end of the novel, John Grimes finds his true identity – his sexual identity – in the very place, the church, where his stepfather conceals his true character and goes on lying and inspiring fear. Throughout the novel, Johnny searches for love and trust he cannot see from Gabriel and finally finds God's love in the church. However, "he has to pass through the microcosmic world of sexual love" as Ogbaa puts it. (1991: p. 175). Here one cannot help noticing the obvious suggestions of homosexual love in the novel's conclusion, which also explores the psychology of Johnny's religious and sexual experiences:

"John looked at his father and moved from his path, stepping down into the street again. He put his hand on Elisha's arm, feeling himself trembling, and his father at his back.

'Elisha,' he said, 'no matter what happens to me, where I go, what folks say about me, no matter what anybody says, you remember—please remember—I was saved. I was there.'

Elisha grinned, and looked up at his father.

'He come through,' cried Elisha, 'didn't he, Deacon Grimes? The Lord done laid him out, and turned him around and wrote his new name down in glory. Bless our God!'

And he kissed John on the forehead, a holy kiss.

'Run on, little brother,' Elisha said. 'Don't you get weary. God won't forget you. You won't forget.'

*Then he turned away, down the long avenue, home. John stood still, watching him walk away. The sun had come full awake. It was waking the streets, and the houses, and crying at the windows. It fell over Elisha like a golden robe, and struck John's forehead, where Elisha had kissed him, like a seal ineffaceable forever." (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*, p. 256)*

Some critics such as Brian Lee (1971: pp. 173-175) attacks Baldwin for advertising homosexuality and for creating a character like John Grimes who is ashamed of his racial identity. However, in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin

seems to provide a different solution to the racial problems and deprivations, which is love, especially the sexual act instead of Wright's pure anger and hatred.

Conclusion

Both *Native Son* (1940) by Richard Wright and *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) by James Baldwin are novels of protest as they represent social critiques of the black experience in conflicts with white-dominated society in the mid-20th century. *Native Son* is considered to be one of the earliest successful attempts to explain the racial issues in America in terms of the social conditions imposed on African-Americans by the dominant white society. It is generally agreed that Wright's focus on *Native Son* is not a matter of literary style or technique but rather ideas and attitudes. Thus, his work has been a force in the social, political and intellectual history of America. Through the character of Bigger Thomas, Wright destroys the white myth of the patient, humorous, subservient black man as mentioned earlier. In his naturalistic approach to the life and death of Bigger Thomas, *Native Son* reminds us of the style of urban naturalism, much like Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1905) where the fates of its characters are determined by forces almost completely beyond their control. It is rather remarkable that the story of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* still appeals to the contemporary reader and the audience as it has been adapted into a film three times: once in 1951, again in 1986 and a third released in 2019.

In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, James Baldwin, for his part, in addition to his criticism of religion and religious institutions, introduces two diametrically opposed characters: John Grimes, representing the new Afro-American who could be integrated into American society and Gabriel Grimes, representing the native son of America, like Bigger Thomas rather than Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom, who can overcome the problems brought by slavery through Christianity. As one of the leading African American authors, Baldwin is also easily recognized for his favorite themes such as "the failure of the promise of American democracy, questions of racial and sexual identity, the failures of the Christian church, difficult family relationships, and the political and social worlds that shaped the American 'Negro' and then despised him for that shaping" as Harris also points out (2001: p. 20). In *Go Tell It on the Mountain* Baldwin writes about the lives and feelings of black people in terms of white subjugation by especially dramatizing what segregation meant in the years when the story takes place. From the way he writes, his protest is less violent than Wright's naturalistic literary approach, in which the acts of violence and intimidation intend to scare the erring Americans.

As the two masterpieces of protest literature, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Native Son*, though written a generation apart, are both novels of the human heart, voicing the fears, frustrations, and sufferings of black people because of the racial disparity in the United States of America. To illustrate violent, disturbing and offensive scenes in a straightforward way, the writers seem to create an estrangement that

enables the reader even today in contemporary American society to look at the racial problems from a fresh, different perspective. Considering the fact that shock elements can provoke a far-reaching awareness in the reader, both novels achieve their aims, making their voices heard against violence, inequality, oppression and systematic racism. In a way, through the acts of violence and hatred, both writers seem to call attention to the fatal/destructive side of the human capacity that is beyond imagination as well as the reality of the things that individuals are capable of doing when they are forced to live under dehumanizing conditions. Thus, it is impossible for the contemporary reader not to notice the call for the necessity to change and eliminate racial prejudice and inequality not only in the African-American communities but also in all societies worldwide.

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