

# Pain of the History: On Family Trauma in Baldwin's Works\*

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**Abstract**—Family trauma caused by racial discrimination is not only an individual problem but also a collective problem. Baldwin incorporates his life experiences and starts from the perspective of individuals to propose mutual care among family members. By combining black culture and American dominant culture, people can reserve and inherit black culture and they can heal trauma. Meanwhile, the process of the writer's writing is a process of curing his trauma.

**Keywords**—Baldwin; racial discrimination; family trauma; trauma healing

## I. INTRODUCTION

The "trauma" theory is used in the literary criticism of African Americans, on one hand it could help reveal the deep indisposition between ethnic minorities and mainstream American society; On the other hand, they use empirical concepts to give them the courage to directly face the pain and closely gaze their own predicaments, sober from the pain, and gradually approaches the path of solving difficulties and healing. Writer Baldwin suffers traumas from many aspects of family and slavery. In his novels, he associates the historical background of black slavery with the African-American family environment and reluctantly opens the scars of black families and relentlessly seeks a cure.

In the early 1990s, American scholar Kathy Caruth first proposed the concept of "trauma", which is a very unusual experience when people face certain sudden or catastrophic event. (Caruth 1996) When people face disasters, they do not necessarily react strongly on the spot, but the illusion of uncontrollable consciousness will appeared repeatedly. The disaster left memories and shadows in the victim's heart that could not be erased, and continued to affect their future life and even their whole life. One look, one thing or one scene can provoke traumatic memories and put them back in pain. Trauma is divided into historical trauma and structural trauma. Lacapra pointed out that "Historical trauma refers to special, often man-made, historical events, including massacres, slavery, apartheid, sexual assault or rape during juvenile period;

And structural trauma usually refers to the loss beyond history, such as separation from the mother, access to the language symbol system, could not fully integrated into a group, etc. (Dominick 189). Freud believes that if an experience produces a stimulus in a short period of time, reaching the limit of soul endurance capacity, making it impossible for people to respond normally, thus causing a permanently disturbed to human mind, this experience can be described as trauma. The "trauma" theory is used in the literary criticism of African Americans, on one hand it could help reveal the deep indisposition between ethnic minorities and mainstream American society; On the other hand, they use empirical concepts to give them the courage to directly face the pain and closely gaze their own predicaments, sober from the pain, and gradually approaches the path of solving difficulties and healing. Writer Baldwin suffers traumas from many aspects of family and slavery. In his novels, he associates the historical background of black slavery with the African-American family environment and reluctantly opens the scars of black families and relentlessly seeks a cure. In the United States, African Americans have roughly the same experience, they are endowed with a common identity so they must support each other and move toward the future.

## II. THE SHADOW OF FAMILY HISTORY

The "family" in Baldwin's literary context refers to both the individual family and the African-American big family in deep meaning. Therefore, "trauma" first of all is a lonely individual emotional experience, but also a kind of common emotional experience of groups and society. From Baldwin's growth experience, the family trauma he suffered mainly stems from six aspects: First, the illegitimate child status makes him been discriminated from childhood, he has no real father love, always be ignored by his loved ones, and lacks family love. Second, the stepfather's rude attitude toward Baldwin's eruption at any time made him trembling with fear and lacks of sense of security from childhood. Third, the step-grandmother's slave experience has brought unbreakable class trauma to the young Baldwin, which is also the collective trauma of African Americans. Fourth, the young Baldwin could not tolerate the racist dilemma of black people, choosing to exile himself in Paris and suffering from the trauma of leaving home. The fifth is the trauma of faith, under the pressure of family and society, Baldwin once converted to religion and sought liberation and became a pastor. But after

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three years, he thoroughly saw the hypocrisy and nothingness of religion, and his spirit was nowhere to be placed. At last, in the social environment of the time, his homosexual tendency made him always torn by the secular and eccentric, which brought him tremendous psychological pressure.

In the novel, neither Florence nor John has received enough family care, and they are also burdened with the trauma caused by the family. It can be said that none of the three brothers and sisters are happy, Rachel's encounter and pain are passed to her daughter Florence in a direct way, Gabriel does not want to waste his concern on a stepchild John who has nothing to do with himself, in addition, the mother Rachel gave more love to Gabriel, the brother of Florence, which to a certain extent, increased the degree of disharmony between the three brothers and sisters. Besides that, whenever Gabriel thinks that John will inherit his property, the rude behavior has caused a deep trauma to John's young mind.

"Trauma" is an emotional experience that is common in African-American families. Before the promulgation of the "The Emancipation Proclamation", black people have always been suppressed, imprisoned by so-called regulations or laws, they are prohibited from possessing private property, prohibited against white people and escape, they must wear metal badges, violators will be whipped or even executed, etc. . This slavery management mode which annihilated the human race, has insulted the African-American community, and even today they cannot completely shake off its shadow. Most black people have experiences of various traumatic events and they all are victims. Black women are the victims of the cruel behavior caused by white racial discrimination, which has caused tremendous harm to their lives and psychology, and they are afraid of white people from the bottom of their hearts.

In this context, black literature has become one of the common carriers of this particular group to recall trauma. It is also the ethnic collective traumatic experience writing which Baldwin has been highly concerned. In "Go tell it on the mountain", Rachel worked hard for a lifetime in a plantation of the southern United States, but she never receive any compensation and respect. When she was young, the cruel and unscrupulous slave owner raped her and auctioned her child to let her feel the separation of flesh and blood. "She was tall and strong, so she became a part of the plantation staff. Later she got married and raised her children, and these children were plundered one by one" . (Baldwin 70) Black slave women are the sexual exploitation targets of white people. Rachel is a representative of racial, gender and sexual oppression, physical and sexual abuse has greatly traumatized her body and mind. From Baldwin's point of view, the first-time sexual crime committed by African plantation owners against African Americans have already caused "American psychological trauma" , "Black people continued to suffer sexual, physical, social and spiritual oppression, they always have been trying to get redemption from the white oppressors, but the oppressors have never thought of making concessions". (M' Baye 173)

In "Go tell it on the mountain", the nightmare of slavery in the South has been lingering in the heart of Rachel's son Gabriel Grimes, lingering in his whole life. After Gabriel's son

Roy left home, Gabriel began to feel uneasy, guessing whether his son went to the battlefield, and the image of a castrated, bloody black body appeared in his mind. This stems from the fact that he witnesses the horror of a black soldier's body in the suburbs which he will never forget. This experience left Gabriel with deep trauma, and the horrible memory shrouded his life like a gloomy curtain.

In the 20th century, the "apartheid" system of American society expelled black people to the edge of a formidable society. In the modern history of the United States, slavery, as the economic foundation of the southern plantation, is actually a man-made disaster. It is the most concentrated, cruel, and most realistic interpretation of racial discrimination. For black people, the issue of racial discrimination is a profound pain. From the very beginning, the direction of the racial system was extremely clear-- gain profits through buying and selling slaves, so the slave owners were driven by profit and madly suppressed slaves in an extremely cruel way. Cotton cultivation and picking is the pillar industry of the southern economy, and the black people who are slaves are the cheapest and most efficient tools. In such a social environment, "survival" is the primary demand of American slaves, especially black women still shoulder the burden of nurturing the next generation. In order to survive, they need to suffer too much suffering and suffer from inhuman torture; in order to survive, they must not fear any adventure, including sacrificing the most precious things in life; in order to survive, they even choose to give up their personal dignity; in order to survive, they cut off all the contacts with everyone; in order to survive, they believe that all conventional commons are not important. After the end of the First World War, the relationship between blacks who migrated to the north and whites in North America became increasingly tense. Until the 1940s, Harriet Beecher Stowe's work reveals the historical challenges faced by mixed-race people of the early 20th century, but her moral and artistic propaganda, as well as the tough attitude of many black leaders and black intellectuals has not fundamentally changed the white misunderstanding and human veto of black people. There is a typical example under Baldwin's pen, the 16-year-old Deborah, who is three years older than Florence, and her father's tragedy: Deborah was brought to the field by many white men, and was raped by them, her angry father went to reason with them, but was beaten to death by the white people. The white people not only did not feel any guilty, but they believed that they were offended by black people, so they were roaring to retaliate, claiming that they would set fire to all black people's houses just like what "they had done before". (Baldwin 77) In many cases, without the need for conclusive evidence, black people would be confirmed to have sexually assaulted white women and been lynched. Not only black women, almost all black men understand a truth: If a white woman takes the initiative to sexually contact a black male, this means the nightwear of this black man has arrived. This is a paradox for black people: if a black male accepts the love of a white woman, then when the love affair exposed, the black man will be lynched sooner or later; but if he refuses, the white woman will accuse him for rape because she feels humiliation, and the black male would also be lynched anyway. The evil consequences of the racial system cast a shadow over black women, men and families.

It is these traumatic memories that make African Americans emotionally depressed and be out of spirits, and often leave their families in a suffocating atmosphere. It is difficult for relatives to build normal family ethics, and it is difficult to present the pictures with affectionate father and dutiful son, loving husband and wife, and deep love between brothers.

### III. THE PERFORMANCE OF FAMILY TRAUMA

Florence's mother Rachel was tortured by slavery, so she knew the feeling of powerless resistance. At first, Rachel planned to step out of the plantation, but the desire to escape was gradually annihilated by life. Because her long-term experience of devastating and hardship has made her lose the painful feeling to hate and forget how to hate, even she is satisfied with staying in this hut and doing laundry for white people, she was fully integrated into the humble role of life, willing to make long-term coexistence with white people in a suffocating environment. Rachel, who was annihilated by life, chose to tolerate and believe in God and tried to instill her thoughts into her daughter. Despite the sore which made by the hard work of her whole life, she still wanted her daughter Florence to be comfortable with the status quo, to accept it, to help with housework and to help take care of her younger brother. When Rachel was lying in bed waiting for death, she was still persuading her children to believe that: God is always fair, which is also a comfort for her.

Baldwin is deeply concerned about the suffering of African Americans in the aspects such like dignity of life, independence of personality and individual freedom. He believes that the deprivation of black freedom and even humanity is a very inhuman barbaric act. Baldwin's Rachel is an example of a combination of deprivation and harm. But such a tragic Rachel chose to tolerate concession and hand over the disciplinary power to God. Actually, it reflects Baldwin's mindset of attempt to forgive the whites' sinful toward black people, his constantly metaphor and admonishing: if you continue to indulge in hatred, sooner or later you will be suffocated by the complex of hatred. If you stick to the past, you will suffer more in the future. Rachel's forgiveness attitude toward planters is based on Baldwin's prediction that: unless black people try to awake white people and tell them how to avoid chaos, otherwise, if the white people continue to ignore the facts, black people will resist fiercely sooner or later.

Baldwin denied the crimes of physical and spiritual harm, and economic oppression from white people toward black people, so as to promote the theory he believed in. In his letter to the nephew, Baldwin affirmed: "If the word unity means anything, that is: we force our brothers and sisters to settle in the status quo in the name of love, not to escape from reality and try to change it" (Baldwin 23- 4). He stressed that we must "try to realize that there is no problem with black slaves, there is only threatened and intimidated body. If we can achieve this, we can save the country and save the world." (401) Baldwin wants to blur and dilute the gap between whites and blacks, and he is convinced that blacks and whites will merge into one nation. They need each other and cannot move toward opposition. Based on this belief, the author gave Rachel such a life attitude in the novel.

Unlike her mother, Rachel's daughter Florence is a marginal people trying to escape the group of black people, she tries to use her personal strength to change the environment. In order to be able to get into the white circle, she worked hard and even used cosmetics to whiten her skin and did unnecessary experiments. At the same time, Florence is an outsider who is outside the black family, she can't agree with the traditional black culture she belongs to. The hate of "nigger", the aversion to the black religion, and the dislike of the hopeless black life made her disdain any connection with the black compatriots. There are many black churches in New York, but Florence has never stepped in, she despises those prayers from her deep heart. Due to the abandonment of the black cultural tradition, Florence who lost the spiritual home is like cutting off the roots of the soul, suffering from loneliness and fear. As a child, a song made Florence see a woman wearing black dress, "standing alone in the misty fog, waiting for the son of God to lead her through the ceremony of white fire". (74) The woman returned to her side, "looked bleaker", but in the end she found out that she was herself, she didn't even know where she should put her feet. This is the portrayal of the lonely soul state of Florence.

The difficult living conditions of African-Americans determine their innocence and powerlessness in the family. Only a few children can get a little more care, so the relationship between Florence's brothers and sisters must be discordant. Hegel believes that "sisters and brothers are independent individuals who respect each other" (Hegel 16). But Florence and her brother Gabriel have deep contradictions. As brothers and sisters, they are closely connected by blood and family bond, they should love each other and support each other. However, this normal ethical feeling is replaced by envy and resentment, they consider the status of the family, and the situation of the blood exists in name only. The relationship between them is even more alienated than ordinary people. When they were still children, the sister Florence was very hostile to her brother Gabriel. On one hand she admires her brother's status in the family, on the other hand she hates being marginalized by her family. This complex of envy and resentment belongs to the category of psychoanalysis, and it is also a literary topic full of connotation and potential for exploration. Envy is the inner attitude of admiration for a specific person or thing. Envy and resentment are in a cycle of conflict, coordination and interdependence, the intricate intertwining of these two emotions is often the deep structural state of human beings. In the eyes of Florence, Gabriel is the jewel in her mother's palm, if Gabriel was never born, then she might has the possibility to liberating herself from endless, unrewarded labor, and thus she was able to have the opportunity to consider her future. But when Gabriel was five years old, she realized that her future and hope were swallowed up. If there is only one person in the family who has a future, it is Gabriel, because he is a boy. For him, everything else can be compromised or even sacrificed. When she saw Gabriel stumbled with his own vomit, Florence cried out loudly: "I hate him! I hate him! He is a big nigger only seek for fun." This attitude of life stemming from her own growing family also affected the relationship between her and her husband Frank, and finally leading to the bleak management of his marriage and the ultimate breakdown.

The lucky one in the eyes of her sister--Gabriel is actually a victim of the viciousness of slavery. In the face of tremendous pressure for survival, she gradually succumbs and chooses a negative attitude towards life. He is satisfied with his wife's dedication, and he treats his stepchild John in order to feel his own strength, and obtains a psychological balance by deceiving people who are close to themselves but weaker than themselves.

As a step-child, John not only failed to receive the care of his stepfather Gabriel, but was violently devastated by violence, even if he tried harder, he could not get a smile from his father. He was eager to integrate into the white American society, but he was always blocked by invisible barriers, and he felt that he was a completely outsider. Like his aunt Florence, John also lives in the narrow gap between the two cultures: he can neither enter the mainstream American society nor approve the traditional black culture. He needs to withstand the pressure from the family and the black community, and needs to accept the whites' contempt and double the pain and suffering. He tried to suppress hatred, which originated not only from his stepfather, but also from the ravages and traumas caused by the black identity in the real world.

#### IV. THE HEALING OF FAMILY TRAUMA

In the novel, people who are traumatized choose different ways to heal.

Rachel and Gabriel converted to religion, and Rachel spent the rest of her life in the numbness of religion, the wound was not healed but was blinded. Gabriel's soul was distorted during the self-confrontation, treating the stepchild in an inhuman way, but he can't get relief from it, not only causing trauma to others, hindering the healthy growth of the child, and he can't escape from the trauma himself. Florence's hostility and alienation from black people did not help her to become a member of the white society, instead, she swam away from the edge of society and tasted pain and loneliness alone. In fact, because she is willing to abandon her own culture, society will undoubtedly abandon her. Florence is a typical example of radical rebellion without outcome. She was deeply influenced by her mother's strong religious atmosphere, but she strongly refused the church's control over her life, the game between the two sides put her in the chaos of contradictions. The hatred of her brother and all the men made her jealous, and even worried that her soul would be restless when she died, this is nothing more than a religious thought in the subconscious. In fact, "all human beings beyond ideology should belong to a community" (Yang Jincui 161). Florence once tried to eliminate the influence of her mother on her, but found that it was in vain, she will always bound with it, even if the body could escape, the spirit could not get rid of it. As for John, trying to heal the trauma by chasing the American white culture, but in the end he is still an outsider in the white society.

Judging from the struggle between characters and trauma, the formation of self-cognition requires a process, a process that is bound to be full of contradictions and setbacks and may never be able to approach the truth. It should be said that people must first correctly recognize their negative side, and then try to eliminate the factors that affect the formation of

pre-determined identities, thus completing the re-creation of identity. As a new generation of blacks born and raised in the United States, Florence believes that if she wants to enter the American white circle and been accepted from the mainstream society, she must completely abandon the "negative factor" of black traditional culture. However, the reality shattered her dreams and proved her ridiculous self-awareness. Without the traditional black culture, she lost her roots, lost her self, and would not been accepted by American society as well. This is the common ambiguity that many ethnic minorities have encountered in American society, and it is also why Baldwin advocates putting up with both cultures.

The traumatic experience made Baldwin deeply aware of the value of mutual tolerance between people and re-recognizing the eternal proposition of "love", so he managed to help the black compatriots to heal the trauma. He believes that the concept of family, group and nation has a crucial influence on self and personality development, so he uses the process of writing to create a place called "family" for those black, poor, oppressed and exhausted "outsider", where there is a temptation of light and warmth. As a basic element of social composition, a happy and harmonious family plays an important role in promoting personal development and maintaining social stability. Family is the first and most influential factor in the process of personal growth and individual socialization. Everyone gets ethics from this initial body and mind growth area, constructs their own social values from this ethical entity, and one of the most important functions of the family is to satisfy the individual's emotional needs. Baldwin incorporates his personal experience into the novels, his creation does not attract people's attention, it is not to deter whites or seek sympathy, but to treat family trauma, to resonate with common pain, and to raise more care in order to save him and family which lack of love. People learn the good qualities of care, love, self-sacrifice, altruism and mutual understanding from home - this initial place, and then have enough ability to form a normal moral and ethical sense. Baldwin showed two attitudes and endings through his protagonist and reaffirmed his inclusive family philosophy and ethnic philosophy: the traumatic experience of African Americans and the suffering will inevitably determine that they cannot abandon black culture and choose to betray, also don't build up barriers with hatred. Then, in the present, the black traditional culture and the mainstream American culture should be integrated, the black group should actively embrace the past and face the future, preserve and inherit the traditional culture that brings hope and light to life. The writer Baldwin himself was also suffering from trauma and also had self-salvation through religious beliefs, but soon he discovered the hypocrisy of religion, so he used the words to heal the trauma. For him, this move not only redeemed himself, but also pointed out a viable road to light for the American black compatriots.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Family is the most basic unit of society, the cradle of personal growth and the habitat of the soul. American slavery and racial discrimination have brought intractable trauma to black families, and black individuals have lost their harbors of

spiritual inhabitation, suffering enormous trauma both physically and mentally. Long-term devastating and tormenting put them in extreme pain, they either give up their struggles and turn to religious self-paralysis, or torture the close and weak to seek malformed comfort, or deny oneself and abandon tradition but there is nowhere to place their souls, which make their family life enveloped in the suffocating atmosphere, and bring scars that are difficult to heal for their personal growth. Baldwin combines his own life experiences to count the misfortunes of the small black family, and then write out the common trauma of the big black family, and actively seek the road to redemption in painful struggles. He evokes resonance with common pain, strives to promote mutual understanding and tolerance among different races, advocates the inheritance of black traditional culture and promotes its integration with mainstream culture, heals the wounds brought by history in the name of love, promotes family harmony and social harmony, thus creating a harbor for the black to perch and self-development.

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