

REGIONALISM IN JAMES BALDWIN'S GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN (Regionalisme Dalam Go Tell It On The Mountain Karya James Baldwin)

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ABSTRACT

This study outlines the historical background and also the life experience of African-American communities in the period before and after the civil war, precisely from the 1840s to the 1920s when there was a massive migration from South America to the North. The history of their lives can be used to explain changes in the status of life of rural communities to urban communities, or agrarian communities to industrial societies. Through his novel Go Tell It On The Mountain, James Baldwin describes changes in the socio-economic status of African-American people according to community ideas America. According to Baldwin, every American, regardless of ethnic status, has the right to achieve success in people's lives, both economically, religiously, educationally, and culturally. While the approach used in this research is a combination of expressive, sociological, and also approaches history. Through discussion from the perspective of Regionalism (regionalism), it will broaden our horizons as readers of the traditions and customs of the black community in the South. The historical framework of socio-economic life is always depicted in the novel, which means that the historical background cannot be separated from the history and conditions of the communities in which we live.

Keywords: migration, life experience, shifting life values, regionalism.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menguraikan latar belakang sejarah dan juga pengalaman hidup masyarakat Afrika-Amerika pada masa sebelum dan sesudah perang saudara, tepatnya dari tahun 1840an hingga tahun 1920an ketika terjadi migrasi besar-besaran dari Amerika bagian Selatan ke bagian Utara. Perjalanan sejarah kehidupan mereka dapat digunakan untuk menjelaskan perubahan status kehidupan masyarakat pedesaan menjadi masyarakat perkotaan, atau masyarakat

agraris ke masyarakat industri. Melalui novelnya *Go Tell It On The Mountain*, James Baldwin menggambarkan perubahan status sosio-ekonomi masyarakat Afrika-Amerika menurut ide-ide masyarakat Amerika. Menurut Baldwin, setiap warga Amerika, tanpa melihat status etnis, memiliki hak untuk memperoleh keberhasilan dalam kehidupan masyarakat, baik secara ekonomi, agama, pendidikan, dan budaya. Sedangkan pendekatan yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah kombinasi antara pendekatan expressive, sosiologi, dan juga pendekatan sejarah. Melalui pembahasan dari sudut pandang Regionalisme (kedaerahan), akan menambah wawasan kita sebagai pembaca mengenai tradisi dan adat-istiadat masyarakat kulit hitam di daerah Selatan. Kerangka sejarah kehidupan sosio-ekonomi selalu tergambar dalam novel tersebut, yang berarti bahwa latar belakang sejarah tidak dapat dipisahkan dari sejarah dan kondisi masyarakat di mana kita tinggal.

Kata Kunci : migrasi, pengalaman hidup, pergeseran nilai kehidupan, regionalism.

INTRODUCTION

The Background of The Study

Instead of focusing on literature as aesthetic and linguistic phenomena, American studies uses literature as mirror through which America's culture can be seen. American studies approach assumes that aesthetic pleasure is only one of many things to be gained from literary works we may learn of human experience of those who wrote and the world in which they lived. It means that from the study

of the careers of American writers and close examinations of some of their major works, we may gain clear understanding of many formative elements of American culture.

One of the distinctive fields of American studies, is the relation between works of art and the culture in which they occur. The concept "culture" seems to embrace the concept "society" and "art". American studies approach studies American culture, whether high culture or the whole culture. From its historical development we know that,

the American studies movement was significantly shaped by formative works of high cultural history like Perry Miller's *The New England Mind* (1930), and F.O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (1941) (Sklaar, 1970 : 559). High cultural history proposed by Sklaar in his article *American Studies and The Realities of America* (1970), showed how mind and art interacted with society.

In American studies, literary works can be used as an inspiring source from which we can understand "American Experience". As a good example, a play written by Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, reflects how immigrants come together into America. This is reflected in the characters of the play, Blanch Du Bois of French origin who visited his

sister, Stella, who married Stanley of Polish origin in New Orleans. Stella and Stanley have lived there with other Whites such as Mitch, Eunice, Steve, with a Negro woman and a Mexican woman. This intermingling of races in the play reflects the myth of the Melting Pot of America.

The Problems of The Study

James Baldwin, as an Afro-American writer, who lived in the early twentieth century, portrayed one segment of black American life. He regarded the problem of the oppressed, African-American existence, to be the dominant issue and it is very different from the existing American society as a whole. The problem of the study in this research can be formulated through the following questions :

1. What is the historical background and the problems

- faced by the African American ?
2. How far does the era of early seventies cover the issue of regionalism in African American life ?
 3. What is the contribution of literature in portraying regionalism or local color as the exploration of specific customs and characters of one of regions in the United States.
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The Objectives of The Study

Through the writing of this scientific research, and related to the problems of the study above, the writer can learn the specific characters of the region or the ethnic group of society, as well as the black people as follows :

1. Finding out the historical background and the problems faced by the African American

Theoretical Approach

This study applies the American studies approach; therefore, the approach used is interdisciplinary. This approach requires the unity among the disciplines to get a better and deeper interpretation from the data provided as well as possible. In this relation, Tremain McDowell (1948 : v) states that “American studies are designed to modify a persistent characteristic

of mankind and to advance a contemporary movement in education”.

In this case, McDowell proposed not only interdisciplinary study, meanwhile, he expresses that American studies scholars have to reconcile the past, present, and future in order to know the real condition and experiences faced by the African American in The United States. The approach used in this study is therefore based on combination of expressive, sociological, and historical approach.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

Defining or understanding the word “regionalism”, we have to know first what is meant by the term regionalism itself. Albert H.

Marckwardt (1996) says that regionalism is :

1. An emotional loyalty or strong feeling for a particular region.
2. An emphasis on regional flavor in art and literature.
3. A specific habit, custom, or way of speaking of a certain region.

Regionalism or local color, is the detailed representation in fiction of the setting, dialect, customs, dress, and ways of thinking and feeling which are distinctive of a particular region, such as Thomas Hardy’s Wessex or Rudyard Kipling’s India. After the civil war, a number of American writers exploited the possibilities of local color in various parts of America; for example, the West (Bret Harte), the Mississippi region (Mark Twain). The South (George Washington Cable and William Faulkner), the Midwest

(E.W. Howe, Hamlin Twain). The term local color writing, is often applied to works which, like O. Henry's or Damon Runyon's stories set in New York City, rely for their interest mainly on a sentimental or comic representation of the surface peculiarities of a region, without penetrating to deeper and more general human characteristics and problems (Abrams, 1988 : 97).

By the early seventies, American Studies covers the topic of regionalism. It concerns with the consciousness of its own unity, feeling a sense of distinction from other parts of the nation. American Studies also widens its boundaries of inquiry to include Ethnic and Minorities studies, Popular culture, Women's studies. Black studies is usually identified by different geography, economic, sociology,

history, literature, etc. In literature, we call regionalism local color, the exploration of specific customs and characters of one of the regions in the United States. Through a piece of writing, we can learn the specific characters of the region or one ethnic group of society.

In the post-Civil War era, regionalism was in part at least a conscious attempt to develop a literature devoted to local color and restricted to depicting the life and scenes of a limited geographical area. The origins of regionalism are clear enough. In the South, local pride and nostalgia for the good old days were stirred by the evil days of reconstruction. In New England, where as Walter Prichard Eaton has noted the stock of the Puritans had been pretty well watered by foreign immigration and by the draining of

the more adventurous men to the West, a like nostalgia led to the attempt to recapture the prewar, undiluted New England spirit (Pritchard, 1956 : 195).

In other areas, where settlement was new, local pride on a level somewhat above civic – club boosting fostered local writers. Thus, local pride and affection were strengthened by the greatness and infinite variety of the national alternative.

Historically, the seeds of local writing had been sown before the Civil War. It was clear to us that local writing had emerged in this period, as stated by Russell’s Magazine : “In our great country, though one, we are many”. There will naturally arise, through its immense extent, shades and varieties of thought and sentiment honestly

entertained, each requiring a separate exponent (195).

The 1875 Nation strengthened the regionalist by declaring that the monotonous lack of contrast in our civilization made it the more necessary to use whatever minute detail might give it distinction. In the meantime, reviewers also began sharply to challenge the American attention to the differences between Americans and Europeans, urging that we concentrate our wits on our affairs for a time, and forget how we look to England. In this case, regional writers were ready to take advantage to all attempts to divert attention from Europe.

The situation of writers in the deep South is of special interest. Their difficulties have been amply attested by Paul Hayne and Sidney

Lanier : the scorn of postwar Southern communities for the author; the lack of interest in literature; the poverty and loneliness of the writer. Many of them felt that Northern magazines would not publish their work. Hence, in despair they turned to romantic reveries of departed South.

The only reason why Southern writers failed to market their wares was that these were defective. In 1879, he urged southern writers to make full use of the unique, undeveloped materials at their disposal. They must, however, avoid sectionalism, which is literary weakness, and the local animus which accompanies it. Whatever is truly southern is likewise truly American. Localism, under such circumstances, is strength.

According to E.W. Parks, the characteristics of the regional writing which appeared in the late seventies and eighties, were mainly that most of the writers were women who, though endowed with ample ability, had been inadequately prepared by their sheltered lives to portray their locality as it actually was. Moreover, once the local colorist had depicted the local scene and people, his materials were exhausted; he could then either repeat himself if he abode by his form or, if he left it, write realism or the historical romance.

The leading theorist of southern local color, James Lane Allen, states that in the 1886, critic laid down rules for the local-color short story. It should focus attention upon atmosphere, sites, and monuments, instead of upon plot, character, and motive. And

descriptions of the scenery, being means to this end, should not take the centre of the stage. The writer should have the observant eye of the scientist as well as he must be a stylist, willing to omit dialect speech and analysis of personality in the interests of higher literary effects. Regionalism, as more inclusive class than local color in literature, enjoyed greater longevity. As declared by H.H. Boyesen in 1892, that hardly a dozen conspicuous states in the Union did not have each its local novelist bent upon recording the widely divergent phases of American culture. Further, in 1893, Hamlin Garland started the interest in the middle border by claiming that the West would have the honor of producing the real American author. According to Garland, the locality counts in literature, to an extent that

Wordsworth would never have dreamed. The vast outlook of the prairies gives strength of general conceptions; the winds give power, penetration, and alertness; the woods add breadth and generosity of intellect.

Indigenous peoples influence the behavior of their ancestors
Hernawaty H & Purba N (2019).

The West is already producing “a literature not of books but of life”, that draws its inspiration from men to nature; and the future development of the West, once it shall have overcome its timidity, will be limitless. With Garland, excitement over regional writing temporary died down among the theorists. In conclusion, regional literature has continued to be produced, following Harris’ dictum

that what is truly regional is also truly American.

DISCUSSION

The discussion of this research will concentrate on the historical background, as well as the experience of the African-American from 1840s to the 1920s of the great migration from the South to the North of the United States, which can be drawn from the life experience of the main characters in the novel. Their life stories could be used to explore the changing status from rural to urban, as well as from agricultural to industrial.

We know that, from the 1990s Negro's social position in the South began rapidly to worsen and many left the South to find greater social security and a more dignified life. After the South lost the war, they could not hold on to their old

way of life anymore. The plantation had been destroyed and black slave had run away. Most of the Southerners experienced a bitter period after the war. Consequently, many people moved to towns and crowded the slums. This can be seen through Baldwin's main character, such as Gabriel, Florence, and Elizabeth. Their conditions force them to live in a tenement and share the place with a black family.

In his work, Baldwin tends to picture human existence which has to be viewed from human dignity and values. In other words, he states clearly how the Black people are considered the same as the whites. In American history, human beings must be seen as civilized and well cultured creatures.

James Baldwin's novel "*Go Tell It On The Mountain*" reflects the

above phenomena. Baldwin has responded to the reality in his society. He has manifested it into his literary work, *Go Tell It On The Mountain* is actually in the factual reality. In socio-cultural environment, other writers often relate their literary works to the actual events, like the way he judges the Black's dignity the same as the White.

In responding to the existing social reality, it seems that Baldwin highlights the socio-economic status of the African-American, their struggle for having the right to live in American society and culture, particularly as common human beings to get opportunity in education and socio-economic life.

Beside the historical approach used in this study, the writer assumes thinks that an

expressive approach can be touched at a glance. By interpreting the novel, through the expressive approach the readers can understand the internal background of the author, because a literary work "is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings of the artist" (Abrams, 1979 : 37). What he thought or lived would likely show up in his fiction either directly or indirectly. Within this approach, the artist becomes major element generating both the artistic product and criteria by which the work is to be judged.

This story covers three successive generations, the children, the parents, and the grandparents. The past experiences of the old generations shaped the life condition of the younger one. In the past, the parents and the grandparents were born in the rural South. They were

treated as slaves and forced to work in the rural plantation. They spent their lives in poverty but their condition was not much better than the older class. Having no skill and education, they received low wages. Therefore, they spent their lives in poverty and misery.

The word was fulfilled one morning, before she was awake. Many of the stories her mother told meant nothing to Florence; she knew them for they were, told by an old black woman in a cabin in the evening to distract her children from their cold and hunger. But the story of this day she was never to forget; it was a day for which she lived. There was a great running and shouting said her mother, everywhere outside, and, as she opened her eyes to the light of that day, so bright, she said and cold, she was certain that the trumpet had sounded. While he still sat, amazed and wondering what, on the judgement day, would be the best behavior, in rushed Bathsheba, and behind her many tumbling children and field hands and house niggers all together, and Bathsheba shouted: Rise up, rise up sister Rachel, and see the Lord's deliverance! He done brought us out of Egypt, just like He promised, and we're free at last! Bathsheba grabbed her, tears running down her face; she dressed in the clothes in which she had slept, walked to the door to look out on the

new day God had given them (Baldwin, 1953 : 72).

Through the novel, the author also describes the Black society, their problems and their social structure. The relation between literature and society are reciprocal. Literature is not only the effects of social causes; it is also the causes of social effects. One novel can cause effect like "*Uncle Tom's Cabin*". This novel is said to have motivated the Yankee from the North and the Black people to fight to free slaves. But the novel "*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*" has been created as the effect of social causes. The author, Frederick Douglas wrote this novel as the effect of bitter experience confronting the Black slaves (<http://rjelal.com/7.2.19/155-162%20REINJAYA%20SITOHAN%20G.pdf>).

Politically, in some ways most African-American have now recovered the dignity and self-respect which had been robbed by white domination. Consequently, the American Negroes are on the threshold of recovering their status. This can be seen when John experienced religious conversion. In relation to the threshold of recovering to their status, the Black tried to integrate themselves into White majority. In this case, they accept integration with the White majority in America.

In his novel, Baldwin rightly points out that America hold the key to inter-racial harmony in a multi-racial world. All people on earth, in spite of being different in race, color, and creed, may live together in peace and friendship. Such a socially harmonious condition will offer

equality, tolerance and mutual respect.

Based on the peculiar social condition which happens to the Blacks, James Baldwin explores the negro characters, not primarily as negroes, but as suffering and inferior people in general. He protests against any novel which portrays the Negroes as the victims of social oppression. On the other hand, he illustrates the Negroes as an over-simplification of an immensely complex situation. The categorization itself is real and can not be transcended. To him the Negroes are human beings who react to any situation in natural human ways like the other races do.

The historical approach used in this study, which reveals the historical background of the novel is based on a literary theory which

says, "Literature tends to reflect the dominant tendencies of its era" (Horton, 1976 : 2), used as a social document, literature can be made to yield the outline of social history. From the life experiences of the main characters in the novel, we could draw the brief history of Black people in the United States, i.e. how they survived in the past.

Then history of Afro-Americans can not be separated from the main stream of American history and in fact it is the result of their interaction with the American environment. Their survival in America has depended on their capacity to adjust and to accommodate themselves to the dominant culture. In the old time, most of the Black people were concentrated in the American South, and this place was usually regarded

as their first place where their history began in the United States. The distinction of Southern history from the Northern parts and other parts of United States was extremely influenced by the existence of Black people in their region.

The younger generation lived in the Northern city, but their condition was not much better than the older generation. They had no skill and education, so they received low wages. In other words, in some sense differences and similarities between the two generations may shape similar and contrasting attitude.

There was a northward movement to find greater freedom and social security than they had in the South. This Northward movement can be seen from the following illustrations, when Gabriel,

Florence, and Elizabeth wanted to go North.

I'm going, Ma, Florence said. I got to go. Her mother leaned back, face upwards to the light and began to cry. Gabriel moved to Florence's side and grabbed her arm. She looked up into his face and saw that his eyes were full of tears (Baldwin, 1953 : 80).

Florence really went to the North, and she said to her mother and her brother Gabriel :

Gabriel can take care of you, she said, her voice shaking with malice. Gabriel ain't never going to leave you and she looked at him. He stood, stupid with bewilderment and grief, a few inches from the bed. But me, she said, 'I got to go'. She walked to the center of the room again, and picked up her bag (Baldwin, 1953 : 81).

'Yes girl. Where you think you going?'

I'm going, she said, to New York. I got my ticket and her mother watched her. For a moment no one said a word. Then Gabriel, in a changed and frightened voice, asked: 'And when you done decide that?' She did not look at him, nor answer his question. She continued to watch her mother. 'I got my ticket, she repeated. I'm going on the morning train' (Baldwin, 1953 : 78-79).

CONCLUSION

As seen in the analysis above, the writer has discussed the African-American Experience in the United States of America from the rural to urban as well as from agricultural to industrial conditions. At the beginning of the process, the South as an agricultural needed the slaves for the plantation, particularly in the cotton belt. Because of the high demand for cotton, the Southerners had to provide a large scale cotton production. In this relation, they preferred to employ Negroes to Indians since the former are famous as hard working people who came from a physically strong face.

Usually, James Baldwin's works tend to picture human existence which has to be viewed from human dignity and values. In other words, Baldwin states clearly

how the Black people are considered the same as the Whites. In American history, human beings must be seen as civilized and well cultured creatures.

In socio-cultural environment, other writers often relate their literary works to the actual events, like the way he judges the Black's dignity the same as the Whites. In responding to the existing social reality, it seems that Baldwin highlights the socio-economic status of the African-American, their struggle for having right to live in American society and culture, particularly as common human beings to get opportunity in education and socio-economic life.

The low socio-economic status of the African-American, can be seen in the setting of place and time of the novel written, especially

in the Southern States of America. These aspects reflect the existence of local color, which however, portrays its society who wished to love appropriately like those who lived in the Northern States of America.

Through the novel, James Baldwin seems to portray the changing socio-economic status of the African-American based on the American ideas. He believes that every American citizen has the right to get success in society, economy, religion, education, and culture.

In addition, the writer concludes that the novel "*Go Tell It On The Mountain*" portrays the life experience of the African-American community both in the South and the North before and after civil war. The local color in the novel, may improve our knowledge about black southern tradition and custom. The

framework of the history of the socio-economic life is always present in the novel. It means that the story can not be separated from the history and the condition of society where it emerged.

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