

Fathers Across Histories: Paternal Inheritance and the Search for Belonging in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and Poro-chista Khakpour's *Sons and Other Flammable Objects*

Aniya Hosseini

Doctorate in English, Azad University of Abadan, Iran

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Abstract— Although James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and Poro-chista Khakpour's *Sons and Other Flammable Objects* (2007) emerge from distinct racial, historical, and cultural traditions, both novels position the father-son relationship at the center of identity formation. Rather than treating fatherhood as a private domestic relationship, each novel presents paternal authority as the primary means through which collective histories, cultural values, and systems of belonging are transmitted across generations. This essay argues that Gabriel Grimes and Khakpour's Iranian immigrant patriarch attempt to preserve worlds already fractured by historical violence. Gabriel's authority is shaped by the enduring legacy of slavery, Black Christianity, and racial segregation, while Khakpour's patriarch embodies the memories of revolution, exile, and migration. Their sons inherit not only paternal expectations but also racialized understandings of masculinity, home, and national belonging. Reading these novels comparatively reveals that paternal inheritance extends beyond family relationships to encompass broader historical structures that continue to shape diasporic and racial identities. While Baldwin depicts religion as the principal medium through which historical trauma is transmitted, Khakpour locates similar processes within migration, displacement, and racialization after the Iranian Revolution and September 11. Bringing these traditions into dialogue demonstrates that fatherhood functions less as a source of stability than as a contested site where race, history, and identity are continually negotiated.

Introduction

Comparative studies of African American and Iranian American literature have increasingly emphasized the ways in which both traditions interrogate race, national belonging, and the construction of identity in the United States. While the historical trajectories of these communities differ profoundly, both literatures expose how dominant racial discourses shape access to citizenship, humanity, and home. Recent scholarship has begun to trace

these intersections by examining the shared concerns of Iranian American and African American writers with racialization, visibility, and exclusion. Such comparisons, however, have largely centered on questions of diaspora, Orientalism, and the politics of race. One recent example is Etedali Rezapoorian and Mahmoudi's (2025) study of James Baldwin's influence on Iranian American writers, which demonstrates that authors such as Poro-chista Khakpour engage Baldwin's racial thought to negotiate racialization, belonging, and diasporic identity. Iranian American literary

scholarship has likewise emphasized migration, exile, and the negotiation of identity between homeland and hostland (Karim, 2006). Building on this scholarship, the present essay shifts attention toward the family as the primary site through which these broader historical experiences are transmitted across generations. This essay extends that conversation by shifting attention from Baldwin's rhetorical influence to the transmission of historical identity through fatherhood. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to the role of the family—and particularly the father-son relationship—as a site where these broader historical forces are transmitted across generations.

James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and Porochista Khakpour's *Sons and Other Flammable Objects* offer a productive opportunity to explore this dimension of identity formation. Although separated by more than half a century and situated within different literary traditions, both novels portray fathers whose authority is inseparable from the historical worlds that produced them. Gabriel Grimes is not simply an authoritarian father; he is a man whose understanding of morality, masculinity, and religious authority has been shaped by the enduring consequences of slavery, racial oppression, and the Black church. Likewise, Khakpour's Iranian patriarch cannot be understood merely as a strict immigrant parent. His expectations of his children emerge from the experience of revolution, exile, migration, and the uncertainties of constructing a new life in the United States.

The sons in these novels therefore inherit far more than family traditions. They inherit ways of understanding the world. Their fathers transmit ideas about manhood, duty, belonging, and success that originate in historical experiences the younger generation has not directly lived. John Grimes grows up within Harlem, yet his imagination is profoundly shaped by a religious worldview inherited from his father. Khakpour's younger generation similarly negotiates an inherited relationship to Iran despite having developed much of their lives within the United States. In both cases, identity is experienced as an inheritance that simultaneously offers continuity and imposes limitation.

Reading these novels together also complicates conventional understandings of immigrant literature and African American literature. Baldwin's novel is rarely discussed alongside contemporary Middle Eastern American fiction, while Khakpour's work is more frequently situated within conversations about diaspora, transnationalism, or post-9/11 racialization. Yet both writers repeatedly return to similar questions. What responsibilities do children bear toward histories they did not create? How do fathers attempt to preserve worlds that are already disappearing? What happens when inherited models of

masculinity no longer correspond to the realities faced by the next generation? These questions move beyond the particular historical circumstances of each novel and speak to broader concerns about the transmission of identity across time.

The comparison is equally illuminating because the differences between the novels are as significant as their similarities. Baldwin's characters confront the legacy of slavery within a nation that is simultaneously their only homeland and a source of persistent racial exclusion. Khakpour's characters negotiate the complexities of migration, exile, and transnational identity, balancing emotional attachments to Iran with the realities of life in the United States. Consequently, the fathers in each novel attempt to preserve different kinds of worlds. Gabriel seeks continuity through religious authority and moral discipline, whereas Khakpour's patriarch seeks continuity through cultural memory and attachment to an Iran that has itself been transformed by revolution and historical change. Despite these differences, both fathers struggle against historical forces that exceed individual control.

This essay argues that *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Sons and Other Flammable Objects* present fatherhood as the principal medium through which historical experience becomes personal identity. The fathers in both novels function as custodians of collective memory, transmitting racialized understandings of masculinity, belonging, and moral responsibility to their sons. Yet the sons do not simply inherit these identities; they reinterpret, resist, and transform them in response to new historical circumstances. By placing Baldwin and Khakpour in conversation, this essay demonstrates that paternal authority is less a stable source of identity than a contested space where race, migration, religion, and history intersect. Such a comparison not only broadens conversations about African American and Iranian American literature but also reveals the central role of family in mediating the relationship between individual subjectivity and collective historical experience.

Fatherhood, Historical Inheritance, and the Formation of Identity

Fatherhood occupies a paradoxical position in literary representations of identity. On one hand, the father appears as an intimate domestic figure whose influence is confined to the family. On the other, he frequently functions as a historical and cultural intermediary through whom larger systems of religion, race, nation, and memory are transmitted to subsequent generations. In this sense, fathers do not merely shape individual personalities; they mediate the relationship between private experience and collective history. Recent scholarship on Iranian cultural traditions

similarly emphasizes that family relationships function as important sites for the transmission of historical memory and emotional experience. Although focusing on maternal rather than paternal voices, Noofeli (2026) demonstrates that Iranian Kurdish lullabies preserve cultural memory and encode social experience through intimate family practices. Together, these studies suggest that the family operates as a central institution through which collective histories are communicated across generations. Both *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Sons and Other Flammable Objects* situate fatherhood precisely at this intersection. Gabriel Grimes and Khakpour's Iranian patriarch embody historical worlds that their sons inherit without having directly experienced them. Rather than functioning as distant historical figures, the fathers make history continually present in everyday family life. This persistence of the past resembles what Mahmoudi and Etedali Rezapoorian (2025) identify in Morrison's *Beloved* as a recursive relationship between memory and the present, where history remains an active rather than a completed reality. Understanding this process requires moving beyond psychological accounts of family relationships toward theories that explain how historical experience becomes personal identity.

Stuart Hall's influential conception of cultural identity provides an important starting point. Rejecting essentialist understandings of identity as a fixed inheritance, Hall argues that identity is always a process of "becoming" as much as "being." Cultural identities are produced through historical experience, representation, and social relations rather than transmitted unchanged across generations. Identity, therefore, is neither a biological essence nor a stable cultural possession; it is continually reconstructed through changing historical circumstances. This insight is particularly useful for comparing Baldwin and Khakpour because both novels depict sons who inherit historical narratives from their fathers while simultaneously confronting social realities fundamentally different from those their fathers knew. John Grimes cannot simply reproduce Gabriel's religious world, just as Khakpour's younger generation cannot fully inhabit the cultural assumptions that shaped their immigrant parents. Identity emerges through negotiation rather than inheritance alone.

If Hall explains why identity remains historically contingent, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* helps explain how history is reproduced within everyday life. Bourdieu argues that social structures become embodied through repeated practices, dispositions, and habits that individuals acquire largely without conscious awareness. Families play a central role in this process because they transmit ways of speaking, behaving, judging, and interpreting the world. Habitus therefore extends beyond explicit instruction. Parents communicate social values not

only through what they teach but also through how they inhabit the world. In both Baldwin's and Khakpour's novels, fatherhood functions as an important site of habitus. Gabriel's authority is expressed through prayer, discipline, silence, and religious ritual, all of which communicate a particular understanding of Black masculinity and moral responsibility. Likewise, Khakpour's Darius Adam transmits assumptions about family loyalty, masculinity, education, and national identity that reflect the historical circumstances of pre-revolutionary Iran and subsequent exile. Neither father simply tells his sons who they should become; they embody entire systems of cultural expectation.

Yet the histories inherited by the sons exceed the fathers' own personal experiences. Marianne Hirsch's concept of *postmemory*, although originally developed to describe the intergenerational transmission of Holocaust memory, offers a productive framework for understanding this phenomenon. Hirsch argues that later generations often inherit memories so deeply embedded within family narratives that they come to shape identity despite not having been directly experienced. These memories are transmitted through stories, emotional attachments, photographs, silences, and everyday family interactions rather than through firsthand experience. While Baldwin and Khakpour address different historical contexts, both novels portray sons whose identities are profoundly shaped by histories they did not witness. John inherits the spiritual and psychological consequences of slavery and racial oppression through Gabriel's worldview, even though he has no direct memory of those earlier experiences. Similarly, Khakpour's Xeres Adam inherits exile, revolution, and migration largely through parental memory rather than personal experience. The father's authority thus derives not only from his role within the family but also from his position as a bearer of historical memory. This intergenerational transmission of memory also suggests that history operates less as a completed past than as an ongoing presence that shapes contemporary identity. As Mahmoudi and Etedali Rezapoorian (2025) argue in their reading of *Beloved*, historical trauma continually disrupts the boundaries between past and present, transforming memory into an active force rather than a completed historical record. Although their analysis focuses on Black temporality, a similar dynamic appears in Baldwin's and Khakpour's novels, where inherited histories remain emotionally and culturally present within family relationships.

Importantly, neither novel presents this inheritance as straightforward or uncontested. Rather than preserving the past unchanged, the sons continually reinterpret what they receive. This process reflects Hall's insistence that identity

is always under construction. Historical inheritance provides a framework through which individuals understand themselves, but it never fully determines their identities. John repeatedly questions Gabriel's religious authority even while recognizing its profound influence upon his life. Khakpour's protagonists similarly negotiate between inherited attachments to Iran and the realities of growing up within an American society that racializes them in ways their parents could not fully anticipate. The fathers therefore transmit histories that require continual reinterpretation rather than unquestioning acceptance.

Race fundamentally shapes this process of inheritance in both novels, although it does so through distinct historical trajectories. Baldwin's characters inhabit a society structured by the legacies of slavery and segregation, where Black fatherhood has long been constrained by racial oppression and economic inequality. Gabriel's understanding of authority cannot be separated from the historical conditions under which Black masculinity developed in twentieth-century America. Khakpour's Darius, by contrast, confronts racialization through immigration, geopolitical conflict, and the transformation of Iranian identity within American public discourse following the 1979 Revolution and, later, the events of September 11. His authority is likewise historical, but it is rooted in exile rather than enslavement. In both cases, however, fatherhood becomes the medium through which larger systems of race and power enter domestic life.

Understanding fatherhood in these terms shifts attention away from the fathers as isolated individuals and toward the historical worlds they represent. Gabriel Grimes and Khakpour's Darius are neither merely oppressive fathers nor simple victims of history. They are figures who attempt to preserve coherence in worlds already fractured by forces beyond their control. Their authority derives from their belief that continuity with the past is necessary for survival. Yet the very conditions that make such continuity desirable also render it impossible. Their sons inhabit new social realities that demand different forms of identity, belonging, and masculinity. The resulting tension between inheritance and transformation becomes one of the central dynamics through which both novels explore the relationship between family and history.

This conceptual framework allows us to read *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Sons and Other Flammable Objects* not simply as narratives about fathers and sons, but as literary investigations of how historical experience is transmitted, contested, and reimagined across generations. The comparison therefore begins not with differences between African American and Iranian American history, but with the shared recognition that the family serves as one of the

primary institutions through which race, memory, and belonging are continually reproduced. Against this background, the fathers emerge as custodians of historical worlds that their sons must inherit, revise, and ultimately redefine.

Fathers as Custodians of Historical Worlds

The fathers in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Sons and Other Flammable Objects* occupy remarkably similar narrative positions despite the profound differences separating African American and Iranian American history. Neither Gabriel Grimes nor Khakpour's Iranian patriarch functions merely as the biological father of the family. Each embodies an older historical order that he attempts to preserve through paternal authority. Their conflicts with their sons therefore exceed ordinary generational disagreement. Instead, both novels transform the father-son relationship into a struggle over which version of history will shape the next generation. The sons do not simply reject their fathers as individuals; they negotiate the historical worlds their fathers represent.

Baldwin introduces Gabriel as a figure whose authority appears almost inseparable from divine authority itself. Within the Grimes household, religion provides the language through which every aspect of family life is interpreted. Gabriel believes that obedience to the father is inseparable from obedience to God, allowing him to present his personal authority as sacred rather than merely paternal. Yet Baldwin gradually exposes the instability underlying this authority. Gabriel's certainty is repeatedly undermined by memories of his own failures, desires, and moral contradictions. His authority derives not from moral perfection but from his desperate need to preserve a world whose legitimacy increasingly depends upon unquestioned obedience. The family thus becomes the institution through which Gabriel attempts to stabilize both his own identity and the larger religious order to which he remains committed.

Khakpour constructs paternal authority through a different historical vocabulary but with strikingly similar narrative effects. Her Darius similarly assumes responsibility for preserving a cultural world that appears increasingly fragile within the United States. His understanding of fatherhood emerges from assumptions formed long before immigration, shaped by Iranian social norms, political history, and expectations regarding masculine responsibility. Migration, however, radically alters the conditions under which these assumptions operate. The authority that once seemed natural now requires continual justification within an American context that neither fully recognizes nor entirely rejects it. Like Gabriel, Khakpour's father experiences the erosion of paternal certainty as the

social world surrounding him changes more rapidly than his inherited values can accommodate.

In both novels, the father's anxiety reflects more than the ordinary fear of losing authority over children. Rather, each father senses that an entire historical worldview may disappear with the next generation. Gabriel fears not only John's rebellion but the weakening of a religious tradition that has sustained Black communities through generations of racial oppression. His insistence upon strict moral discipline reflects an understanding of survival forged under historical conditions in which religion functioned as one of the few institutions controlled by African Americans themselves. To surrender paternal authority therefore risks surrendering a collective history that extends far beyond the family.

Khakpour's patriarch experiences a comparable anxiety, although its historical origins differ significantly. Exile transforms memory into one of the few remaining forms of continuity available to immigrant families. The father consequently assumes responsibility for preserving language, customs, political memories, and cultural identity within an environment that continually encourages adaptation. His authority derives less from nostalgia than from a belief that cultural continuity depends upon successful transmission between generations. Yet this project becomes increasingly difficult because the sons encounter American society in ways fundamentally unavailable to their father. They learn to navigate schools, friendships, racial classifications, and cultural expectations that produce identities no longer defined exclusively by Iranian history.

The contrast between the fathers therefore illuminates an important distinction between African American and Iranian American historical experience. Gabriel seeks continuity within a nation that has always been his home yet has repeatedly denied the full humanity of Black Americans. His struggle concerns not migration but survival within structures of racial domination that long predate his own life. Khakpour's patriarch, by contrast, negotiates the disorientation produced by migration itself. He remembers another homeland, another political order, and another cultural vocabulary against which American life is continually measured. Despite these differences, both fathers understand identity as something that must be consciously preserved against historical forces threatening its disappearance.

This understanding of fatherhood complicates conventional readings that interpret paternal authority primarily through the language of oppression. Certainly, both Gabriel and Khakpour's patriarch exercise forms of authority that constrain their sons' freedom. Yet reducing either character

to an oppressive patriarch risks overlooking the historical pressures that produce their behavior. Baldwin repeatedly suggests that Gabriel's rigidity reflects not simply personal temperament but the psychological consequences of generations of racial violence and social exclusion. Likewise, Khakpour portrays immigrant fatherhood as deeply entangled with the uncertainties of exile, economic insecurity, and cultural displacement. The fathers become authoritarian not because history is irrelevant but because history weighs so heavily upon their understanding of responsibility.

At the same time, neither novel invites readers to romanticize paternal sacrifice. Both Baldwin and Khakpour remain attentive to the emotional costs imposed upon the next generation. The fathers often mistake preservation for permanence, assuming that the values enabling their own survival should remain unchanged despite radically altered historical circumstances. Gabriel expects John to embrace the same religious certainties that once provided meaning within an earlier generation of Black life. Khakpour's patriarch similarly assumes that attachment to Iranian culture can remain stable despite the increasingly hybrid realities inhabited by his children. In both novels, the fathers underestimate the extent to which historical change transforms not only social conditions but also the meanings of identity itself.

The sons therefore occupy an uneasy position between inheritance and innovation. They cannot entirely reject the historical worlds transmitted by their fathers because those worlds constitute an essential part of their own identities. At the same time, neither can they simply reproduce inherited models of masculinity, belonging, or moral responsibility. John Grimes's spiritual struggle reflects his effort to distinguish authentic faith from inherited obligation, while Khakpour's Xerxes seeks forms of Iranian American identity that acknowledge exile without allowing it to determine every aspect of their lives. Their development depends less upon escaping paternal influence than upon reinterpreting it.

Seen comparatively, these novels suggest that fatherhood functions as a historical institution rather than merely a biological relationship. Fathers become custodians of collective memory, translating broader historical experiences into the everyday language of family life. Religion, migration, race, and nation enter the lives of children not only through schools, governments, or public discourse but through ordinary domestic interactions. The family thus becomes one of the principal locations where historical structures acquire emotional force. Baldwin and Khakpour differ in the histories they portray, yet both recognize that the transmission of identity begins not in

abstract political institutions but around the family table, within household rituals, and through the complicated relationships between fathers and sons.

This shared insight also reveals the central irony governing both novels. The fathers believe they are preserving stable identities for their children, yet history ensures that no identity remains stable across generations. The very forces that make preservation necessary—racial oppression, migration, revolution, and social transformation—also guarantee that inherited identities will be continually revised. Consequently, paternal inheritance never produces simple continuity. Instead, it initiates an ongoing process of negotiation through which each generation reconstructs the meaning of belonging under new historical conditions.

Inheriting History: When Fathers Can No Longer Speak the Language of Their Sons

If paternal authority in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Sons and Other Flammable Objects* depends upon transmitting historical knowledge across generations, both novels ultimately expose the limitations of that transmission. The fathers repeatedly assume that the languages through which they understand the world remain universally meaningful. Gabriel relies upon the language of Scripture, sin, redemption, and divine authority. Khakpour's Darius depends upon the language of homeland, sacrifice, family obligation, and cultural continuity. Yet both novels demonstrate that historical change gradually separates fathers and sons not because they cease loving one another but because they no longer inhabit the same interpretive world. The central conflict therefore lies less in generational rebellion than in the failure of inherited languages to describe new historical realities.

For Gabriel, religion provides a complete interpretive system. Every success, failure, desire, and disappointment acquires meaning within a theological framework that has shaped his understanding of the world since childhood. His authority as a father depends upon the assumption that this framework possesses universal validity. Consequently, when John questions Gabriel's expectations, Gabriel interprets the conflict primarily as spiritual failure rather than generational difference. Baldwin thus reveals how paternal authority often mistakes historical specificity for timeless truth. Gabriel cannot fully recognize that his understanding of religion emerged under particular social conditions—Jim Crow America, Black Protestant traditions, and communities where the church served as both spiritual refuge and political institution. What appears eternal to Gabriel is, in fact, historically situated.

Khakpour's immigrant father exhibits a similar confidence in the permanence of his own interpretive framework. His understanding of honor, education, masculinity, and family

loyalty reflects a world shaped by pre-revolutionary Iran and the experience of displacement that followed. For him, preserving Iranian identity requires maintaining continuity with the values that once organized ordinary life. Yet these values become increasingly difficult to translate within the American context inhabited by his children. The sons understand Iran less through direct experience than through stories, family rituals, and inherited memories. As a result, cultural identity itself becomes mediated rather than immediate. The father's language presumes experiences the younger generation has never possessed.

Both novels therefore complicate the common assumption that historical memory naturally passes from one generation to the next. Memory does not simply travel intact across time; it must be interpreted. Baldwin repeatedly suggests that John hears Gabriel's religious language differently than Gabriel intends it. What Gabriel experiences as moral instruction often becomes, for John, a source of fear, guilt, or alienation. Likewise, Khakpour's Xerxes receives stories of Iran through the emotional lens of exile rather than through lived familiarity with the country itself. The sons inherit narratives, but not the historical conditions that originally produced those narratives. Consequently, the meaning of inheritance itself changes.

This distinction reveals one of the most subtle similarities between the two novels. Neither father realizes that successful transmission requires translation rather than repetition. Gabriel attempts to reproduce the moral world that shaped him, assuming that identical lessons will produce identical outcomes. Khakpour's patriarch similarly seeks continuity through preservation, believing that maintaining Iranian cultural practices will secure a coherent sense of identity for his children. Yet historical experience cannot simply be preserved unchanged because the social worlds inhabited by fathers and sons differ fundamentally. The sons do not reject history itself; they reject the assumption that inherited interpretations remain sufficient for the present.

The consequences of this failure become especially visible in the emotional distance separating fathers and sons. Although both novels depict moments of conflict, their deeper concern lies with misunderstanding. Gabriel rarely recognizes the interior complexity of John's spiritual life because he interprets John's struggles through categories already established by his own experience. Similarly, Khakpour's father often mistakes cultural difference for cultural loss, interpreting his children's adaptation to American life primarily as evidence of forgetting rather than transformation. In both cases, paternal love becomes constrained by interpretive certainty. The fathers love their

sons, yet they often cannot imagine forms of identity different from those they themselves inherited.

Significantly, neither Baldwin nor Khakpour presents the sons as entirely liberated from paternal influence. John cannot simply escape Gabriel's religious imagination because it has already shaped the language through which he understands guilt, redemption, and moral responsibility. Likewise, Khakpour's younger generation remains profoundly connected to Iranian history even while questioning many of its inherited assumptions. The novels therefore reject simplistic narratives of generational emancipation. Children do not become free by abandoning inheritance; they become adults by reinterpreting it. Identity emerges through revision rather than rejection.

Seen from this perspective, the father-son relationship becomes an important site for understanding broader questions of historical continuity. Families function not merely as biological units but as institutions through which societies attempt to reproduce themselves across time. Religion, nation, race, and cultural memory survive because they are continually rearticulated within domestic life. Yet Baldwin and Khakpour both insist that this process is inherently unstable. Every act of inheritance also produces reinterpretation because each generation inhabits historical circumstances unavailable to the previous one. The fathers therefore become guardians of traditions that cannot remain unchanged precisely because history itself continues to move.

Race intensifies this instability in different ways within the two novels. Gabriel's authority develops within a society where Black survival depended upon institutions capable of sustaining communal identity despite systematic oppression. His attachment to religious certainty therefore reflects not only personal conviction but historical necessity. Khakpour's patriarch confronts a different challenge. Migration places him within a racial order that continually redefines what it means to be Iranian in America. Political events beyond the family's control—from the Iranian Revolution to shifting American perceptions of the Middle East—reshape the meanings attached to the identity he seeks to preserve. In both cases, fathers discover that history does not remain outside the household. It enters family life by transforming the very language through which parents and children attempt to understand one another.

This realization ultimately reveals the tragic dimension of paternal inheritance in both novels. The fathers' inability to communicate fully with their sons does not stem from a lack of affection or commitment. Rather, it reflects the historical condition of modern identity itself. Every generation inherits languages forged under circumstances that no

longer entirely exist. Fathers therefore attempt to prepare their children for futures using vocabularies shaped by the past. Baldwin and Khakpour suggest that this tension cannot be resolved through greater discipline, stronger family bonds, or more faithful cultural preservation. It is an inevitable consequence of history's continual movement.

Recognizing this shared predicament also clarifies why the father-son relationship occupies such a central position in both novels. Rather than treating family conflict as merely private drama, Baldwin and Khakpour use domestic life to explore one of the most fundamental questions of modern identity: How does a generation remain faithful to its history without becoming imprisoned by it? Neither novel offers a definitive answer. Instead, both suggest that genuine inheritance requires neither unquestioning obedience nor absolute rejection, but the difficult work of translating the past into forms capable of speaking to the present.

Race, Diaspora, and the Reconstruction of Belonging

Although *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Sons and Other Flammable Objects* emerge from distinct literary and historical traditions, both novels ultimately ask a similar question: how does one inherit a history that one has not fully lived? The answer offered by Baldwin and Khakpour lies not in biological inheritance but in the everyday practices through which race, memory, and belonging are transmitted within the family. Rather than presenting identity as an individual achievement, both writers depict it as the product of historical forces that precede the subject. Fathers become the principal mediators of those forces, translating collective histories into domestic expectations, moral obligations, and emotional attachments. Consequently, the father-son relationship becomes a privileged site through which race and diaspora are experienced as lived realities rather than abstract historical categories.

Diaspora studies has consistently challenged the assumption that homeland is simply a geographical place to which displaced communities desire to return. James Clifford argues that diasporic identities are constituted through routes rather than roots, emphasizing movement, translation, and continual negotiation over fixed origins. Avtar Brah similarly distinguishes between homeland and home, demonstrating that belonging emerges through everyday social practices rather than territorial attachment alone. While these interventions illuminate the mobility of diasporic identities, Baldwin and Khakpour suggest that such identities are also fundamentally intergenerational. Diaspora survives because historical experiences are continually transmitted within families, where parents attempt to preserve cultural worlds increasingly transformed by migration and historical change.

Khakpour's novel makes this process particularly visible. The first generation remembers Iran through direct experience, while the younger generation encounters it primarily through stories, family rituals, language, and fragmented memories inherited from their parents. Iran therefore functions less as an immediately accessible homeland than as a narrative transmitted across generations. Yet this transmission is never complete. The sons inherit emotional attachments to a country they know largely through the memories of others. Their relationship to Iran is consequently mediated rather than experiential, illustrating what Marianne Hirsch describes as postmemory: the inheritance of powerful historical experiences that shape identity despite not having been directly lived. Exile thus transforms fatherhood into an act of cultural preservation. The immigrant father becomes responsible for sustaining a historical continuity that geography alone can no longer guarantee.

Baldwin's novel presents a different but equally complex form of historical inheritance. John Grimes does not inherit exile from an ancestral homeland but the enduring consequences of slavery, segregation, and racial oppression within the United States itself. His father's world is rooted in a specifically African American historical experience in which the Black church emerged as one of the few institutions capable of sustaining communal identity under conditions of systemic racial exclusion. Gabriel's insistence upon religious discipline therefore cannot be reduced to personal authoritarianism. His understanding of fatherhood reflects an attempt to preserve forms of moral and communal survival forged through generations of racial violence. Like Khakpour's immigrant father, Gabriel becomes a custodian of history, even though the history he seeks to preserve is located not in migration but in the long aftermath of slavery. As Farah Jasmine Griffin (1995) argues, African American narratives of movement are fundamentally concerned with the search for home rather than the recovery of a lost geographical homeland. Because home itself has been historically destabilized by slavery and racial oppression, African American identity is continually negotiated through memory, mobility, and community. Baldwin's representation of Gabriel and John similarly reveals that belonging is produced through historical inheritance rather than territorial rootedness.

The distinction between these two histories reveals one of the central contributions of comparing Iranian American and African American literature. This comparison also builds on recent scholarship showing that Iranian American writers have repeatedly turned to Baldwin as a model for understanding America and negotiating their place within American racial discourse (Etedali Rezapoorian and Mahmoudi, 2025). Whereas that scholarship emphasizes

Baldwin's rhetorical and political influence, the present essay examines how the father-son relationship becomes a medium through which historical memory and racial identity are transmitted across generations.

Iranian American identity develops through transnational movement between homeland and hostland, while African American identity develops within a nation that simultaneously constitutes home and the site of historical dispossession. Yet in both cases, race mediates the possibility of belonging. Iranian Americans frequently confront racialization through the discourse of foreignness. Political events such as the Iranian Revolution and, later, September 11 transform Iranian identity into a visible marker of suspicion within American public discourse. Homeland itself becomes racialized, no longer signifying merely cultural origin but also political otherness. African Americans encounter a different configuration of racial formation. Rather than being treated as foreigners, they have historically been positioned as perpetual internal outsiders whose citizenship has never guaranteed full inclusion within the American nation. These distinct histories produce different relationships to homeland, but both demonstrate that race fundamentally structures the conditions under which belonging becomes possible.

Because race organizes belonging differently across these traditions, paternal inheritance also assumes different forms. Gabriel transmits strategies of survival developed within the context of Black Christianity, while Khakpour's Darius transmits memories of exile and cultural displacement. Nevertheless, both fathers understand identity as something requiring conscious preservation against historical forces threatening its dissolution. Their authority derives not merely from patriarchal power but from the conviction that history must be carried forward through the next generation. The family consequently becomes one of the primary institutions through which racialized identities are reproduced. Religion, language, family rituals, cultural memory, and everyday practices function as mechanisms through which broader historical experiences enter domestic life.

Yet both novels simultaneously question whether such transmission can ever remain stable. Stuart Hall's conception of cultural identity as a continual process of becoming rather than a fixed inheritance illuminates the generational conflicts represented in both narratives. Identity does not simply pass unchanged from fathers to sons because the historical conditions that produced one generation differ fundamentally from those inhabited by the next. John grows up in a racial landscape already changing from the one that shaped Gabriel, just as Khakpour's younger generation inhabits an America transformed by

new forms of immigration, globalization, and racialization. The sons therefore inherit histories that require continual reinterpretation rather than unquestioning preservation. Their identities emerge not through faithful repetition but through negotiation between inherited memory and contemporary experience. Such transmission should therefore be understood not as the preservation of a fixed past but as the continual reinterpretation of historical experience. Similar to Mahmoudi and Rezapoorian's (2025) argument that Morrison's narrative refuses to separate past from present, Baldwin and Khakpour likewise portray inherited history as something that remains unfinished and continually reshaped by each generation.

This instability exposes the limitations of paternal authority itself. Neither Gabriel nor Khakpour's patriarch recognizes that historical continuity requires translation rather than reproduction. Gabriel interprets John's resistance as spiritual failure because he cannot imagine forms of Black identity no longer organized exclusively through his own religious framework. Khakpour's immigrant father similarly interprets cultural adaptation as loss because he measures belonging according to assumptions formed before migration. In both novels, fathers mistake historically specific systems of meaning for universal truths. Their inability to recognize changing forms of racial formation produces not simply family conflict but a broader crisis of historical transmission.

Read together, Baldwin and Khakpour demonstrate that race and diaspora are not only public or political formations but also intimate structures of everyday life. The histories of slavery, migration, revolution, and racialization become meaningful because they are lived within families, where parents attempt to prepare children for worlds they themselves do not fully understand. Fatherhood therefore emerges as a crucial point of intersection between personal identity and collective history. The fathers transmit memories of historical survival, while the sons inherit the responsibility of translating those memories into new social realities. Identity is neither wholly preserved nor entirely reinvented. Rather, it remains an unfinished process through which race, diaspora, and belonging are continually reconstructed across generations.

CONCLUSION

Although *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Sons and Other Flammable Objects* emerge from distinct historical and cultural traditions, both novels reveal that fatherhood serves as a crucial site where race, history, and belonging are negotiated across generations. Gabriel Grimes and Khakpour's Iranian immigrant patriarch function not merely as family figures but as custodians of collective memory,

attempting to preserve historical worlds shaped respectively by slavery and racial segregation, and by revolution, exile, and migration. Their sons inherit these histories not as fixed identities but as evolving frameworks through which they must understand themselves in changing racial and social landscapes.

Reading Baldwin and Khakpour together demonstrates that the transmission of identity is never a simple act of preservation. Instead, it is a process of continual reinterpretation in which inherited memories, cultural values, and paternal expectations are reshaped by new historical conditions. The comparison therefore challenges essentialist notions of both race and diaspora by showing that identity is produced through ongoing negotiation rather than inherited unchanged. Ultimately, these novels suggest that belonging is neither guaranteed by geography nor secured through cultural continuity alone. Rather, it emerges through the difficult work of translating the past into forms capable of speaking to the present, revealing the family as one of the primary spaces where racialized and diasporic identities are continually reconstructed.

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