CHAPTER - VII

CONCLUSION

As an author, James Baldwin is in a situation and in a milieu, signifying the synthesis of all the forces, which influence and illuminate the period in which he lives. The great temptation of the writer is to write for immortality and not just for his times. If the purpose of writing is to change the world, the writer must be at pains to discover and work within his unique historical situation. He should engage the predicaments and choices offered by his situation. He must participate, through his writings in the sociopolitical and moral struggles of his times and promote freedom and fair deal for all the dispossessed people throughout the world.

Baldwin is committed to work for the removal of racial evils in American society, but at the same time their writings manifested universal outlook and therefore attained everlasting appeal. “Good art commands discovery and articulation of the most exalted values.” (S.A. 165)

“Ellison has expressed the predicament of the black Americans without violating his passionate dedication to art as an agency for confronting and revealing that which has been hidden “by our cultivated incapacity to perceive the truth” (G.T .229). This achievement throws ample light on the success of Ellison as a writer and artist with commitment.
Baldwin changed himself from a pulpit orator to a prolific writer while Ellison turned from the trumpet to the typewriter. Even though Baldwin and Ellison drew inspiration from Richard Wright, both of them later turned out to be his bitter critics. It was their commitments, which compelled them to have differing viewpoints from their idol. Critics like Irving Howe censured Baldwin and Ellison of forsaking the mission of a black writer, which constituted according to Howe an expression of anger and militant assertion of black freedom. Howe cited Wright as the most emphatic voice of black freedom in fiction and praised Wright, for his predilection for protest literature. He was unhappy with Baldwin and Ellison, for their failure to carry the banner of protest was done by Wright.

It with positive products of their socio-political predicaments. They were the shining models of humanity that could overcome inherited or imposed impediments. Literature for them provided Baldwin resented the attempts of literary critics to rigidly restrict their role based on their race and colour. Wright saw black life blank and bitter whereas Baldwin and Ellison saw outlet for thwarted self-expression. They conceived of the human situation as a kind of cosmic exile and committed themselves to counter isolation with fraternity. They were also committed to leave the uneasy sanctuary of race and colour to take their chances in the world of art. The differences in the life of Wright, Baldwin and Ellison attest to the wide spectrum of life for blacks in America. Wright, the
product of the deep south of a lower class family, and of broken home, never forgot the misery that was his lot. He felt deeply the hurt of black living. Hunger and violence were his family heirlooms. He was deprived of the possibility of what he might become. Defined and manipulated by the white south he was robbed of a sense of self-worth and a sense of poise and direction in life. The more his society conspired against his human dignity, the more committed he was to assert himself. His commitment to write was born of an intense desire to affirm his own reality. Southern blacks were forced to suit even their speech habits to the expectations of the whites. He was cognizant of the fact that to attempt to write seriously was to involve oneself into one of the most self-destructive and almost self-murderous careers.

In such a situation Wright committed himself not to be intimidated into silence. He was determined to speak out at all costs and to express his own self in writing. His entire life was an assertion of self in a society in which individual perceptions of self were pitted against its prejudices. By immersing in suffering one accepts the commitment inherent in unselfish love. “Sorrow is the only key to joy” (James Baldwin, Just Above My Head (New York: Dial Press, 1978: 569).

And Ellison hailed from a lower middle class family, not in Mississippi but in Oklahoma. He felt and accepted the challenge of his background. He stepped outside his black experience and viewed it objectively. He found him-
self neither in the structured life in deep south nor in the apparently free and deceptively luminous nightmare life of New York. The openness of his frontier town freed him of the kind of restrictions Wright and Baldwin experienced. Ellison grew up with the actual experience of possibilities which convinced him of the validity of personal will and effort and the viability of American democracy.

Wright’s protagonist Bigger is the product of a criminal society and Wright was convinced that such a society must be changed in order to prevent the creation of more Biggers. Bigger has no other option but to kill in order to save himself. He becomes a representative actor who performs a crucial act so that others will not have to commit similar atrocities.

Unlike Wright, Baldwin indicates an intense determination to embrace their blackness as a high value and as a means for changing the fate of America. Being black is a mark of distinction for them. For the other blacks rage and violence, religion and drugs and at times exile or suicide provide escape routes from the drudgeries of life. But for these writers their writings were the instruments for denying the attempts to mould their nature to the black stereotypes, for preserving a sense of their own lives.

Social problems are never solved by enforcing the law of revenge. Baldwin and Ellison show that anger and violence are not necessarily the only posture for an authentic black man. They share Wright’s concern for the need for
justice. But Wright could not shed his memories of a bleak childhood and a suffocating adulthood. Violence of Bigger or the exile of Fish belly in his novel The long Dream is the answer that Wright offered. Wright himself opted for a self-imposed exile and died as an expatriate in Paris. But Baldwin and Ellison found that America is the only arena in which a black person can hope to achieve freedom in spite of present day problems.

Baldwin was not destroyed in his attempt to withstand the violent and corrupt forces. He learned to endure and was even tempered by them. He did not believe in wanton destruction, mindless violence and motiveless malignity. He saw the church often lagging in its commitment for social justice. His hero Johnny is not converted to the church, but to the whole life of his people. The redemption that he finds is not through the grace of God, but through an affirmation of his own self. The blacks in America have sunk so low that they have the satisfaction that they can go only upwards. Orpheus in the European legend descended into the interior self in order to find his lost Eurydice. Ellison’s hero is a subterranean Orpheus who is ascending to the surface to find his own self.

The protagonists of Wright and Ellison have found themselves at the bottom. Baldwin also declared, “In a way, the Negro tells us where the bottom is: because he is there” (N.K.M.N. III) so he must ascend.
The artist is cast in their writings in the role of a committed revolutionary fighting for radical social changes. They are “practically and magically involved in collective efforts to trigger real social change.” Both were committed to respond to the demands of a changing society – a society where tradition is vying with charge and directed the change itself. Both Baldwin had faith in the inevitability and reality of human progress, the centrality of the Individual, and the need for personal fulfillment with a tacit acceptance of personal responsibility for one’s society. They also recognized the need for free thinking, for the individual to hold conflicting points of view without ceasing to function. For them the individual is shaped as a result of the collision with a public world which is simultaneously a threat and a source of opportunities and challenges. Just as the larva breaks through all that curbs its growth and metamorphoses into a butterfly, the individual has to fight against everything that obstructs his development and rise to his full stature. Every black who “seeks to escape from his rut or corner by vanishing, and so becomes an accomplice in his own elimination” (Roger Rosenblatt, Black Fiction (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974: 185).

Survival is both the secret and paramount obsession of contemporary man. If existence is an endless obstacle race for survival then the experiences of the protagonists of Baldwin and Ellison may be thought of as public documents on survival. Baldwin started his career as a writer as a means to sheer survival.
Like Malcolm X, Baldwin also learned how “to view everyday living as survival” Ellison’s *Invisible Man* too is about the art of survival. Only the fittest can survive. But the survivals of the heroes of Baldwin and Ellison are’ secured with dignity in the midst of evil, terror, exploitation and pain. They were committed to individual freedom and social justice not through hatred and separation, not out of pity, not at the cost of self-respect but through persuasion and love. They aimed at social harmony through reconciliation since the drive towards reconciliation and unity provides “a new sense of life’s possibilities.” (N.K.M.N. 23).

As writers committed to the black folk tradition Baldwin and Ellison saw the blues as a tool of survival and used the folk music and art as such in their writings. Baldwin and Ellison believed in the concept of “the surgeon’s idea of pain” is embodying the inevitability of inflicting temporary pain for effecting permanent cure.

Wright was convinced that the whites would never give black folks a chance to lead a decent life and that the American Dream was nothing but a nightmare for the blacks. To be black was to be an outsider and outcast and so the mission of that outsider was terrorism. He was forced to inch his way toward a great blasting moment of supreme destruction. The blacks found themselves as devocalized dogs; no amount of barking released them from their dehumanized conditions. He lost faith in the healing power of love. So he was committed to be
hard. Violence, rage and homicidal malevolence inspired his heroes and they believed that these alone ensured them manhood. Baldwin was a spokesman and so he believed in the power of words. He wanted to seek a direct entry into the world for the sake of redeeming it from the brutality and the indecencies and to serve a truly human and humane purpose. So he was committed to be heard. He is remembered for his words of which he was a master and a wizard. In his words, “we comprehend the ultimate intelligence of our enforced commitment to finally bring humanity to the world” (Amiri Baraka, “We Carry Him as US”, The New York Times Book Review (20 December 1987: 27-29.)

He said things that the downtrodden people longed to say. He said them right out loud, for the entire world to hear. Thus he became the voice of the inarticulate masses. He preached, prayed, persuaded and proclaimed that the dooms day would be arriving soon if status quo prevailed. The titles of his books reveal his passion for telling others: Go Tell It on the Mountain, Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone, and If Beale Street Could Talk.

Since men use words to conceal the chaos that seethes beneath the surface, Ellison did not believe in shouting hoarse. He realized that “if the word has the potency to revive and make us free, it has also the power to blind, imprison and destroy.” (S.A.24) He did not endorse the use of violence; nor did he believe in mere persuasion. For violence begets violence and a flow of words is no proof of wisdom. So he was committed to be seen, to reveal the unseen and
to expose the gap between apparent and actual realities and promises and practices. His protagonist achieves visibility when he learns to look beneath the surface and to look for what lies behind the face of things. Wright’s protagonist is a rebel who chooses to go wrong in his own way rather than go right in somebody else’s. He is a mercenary who embodies physical hunger and the rifle is his symbol. Baldwin’s protagonist is a spokesman and a witness who at times talks blasphemy, but talks his own blasphemy. He is a missionary, passionately introspective who embodies emotional hunger and the Bible is his symbol. Ellison’s protagonist is a trickster who considers it “better to live out his own absurdity than to die for that of others” (422). He is a clairvoyant visionary with insatiable artistic hunger carrying a bugle as his symbol.

Wright’s view of the world, born out of his bitter personal experiences was madly unjust and pointlessly brutal. Baldwin and Ellison attacked the plausibility of Bigger as an accurate representation of a real black person. Bigger is not only a stereotype that distorts black life into a horror story, but a reinforcement of ideas held by whites about the prejudicial criminal proclivities of blacks. Bigger is the stereotypical black man that existed in the minds of white Americans. Whites had created such stereotypes and used them as a justification for their ill treatment of blacks. Baldwin and Ellison were against such stereotypes and caricatures. They were given to optimism and insisted upon both the gloom and glory of American life. Both of them advocated individual
initiative and the case for diversity. They were committed to the establishment of a society that makes room for as many individual life styles as there are individuals to create them; a society in which blacks like any other people, can create their destiny through acts of will.

Wright at times engaged in fantasies of revenge against whites for casting him out and treating him as dirt. Yet the basic commitment of his art was constantly moving toward the theme of black and white unity. For example, wright says, “I am black and I have seen black hands raised in fists of revolt. Side by side with the white fists of white workers” and “the differences between black fold and white fold are not blood or colo (Richard Wright, “I have seen Black hands,” New Masses, 26 (June 1934,163).

Baldwin’s writing is not just a docile appeal but a warning of an impending revolution. The choice is clear: co-existence or no existence. He told the whites: “not that I drive you out or that you drive me out, but that we learn to live together (Op.cited, 247).

He exhorts the whites to summon the courage to face their reality and to work toward a revolution together. He does not accept the view that hatred of whites is the inevitable result of the experience of being black in America. He does not endorse the view that hatred is the only reaction to oppression. Hatred always destroys both the perpetrator and the victim. This recognition has given rise to Baldwin’s vision of the redemptive role of the blacks. In abandoning,
Christianity, Baldwin never rejected the possibilities offered by the transforming power of love. He is committed to the power of love in human affairs and a sustaining influence and an abiding faith in the interpretation of the world without prescriptions of how to change. His intention was to describe the racial situation so thoroughly that the readers could no longer evade it. Baldwin is compelling the whites as well as blacks to remove prejudices from their minds and realize that the ship of America will sail with black and whites together or sink. According to Ellison most American whites are culturally part black American without even realizing it. “Whatever else the true American is, he is also, somehow, black. (G.T.III) He was committed, therefore, to explore the mystery which haunts American experience and that is the mystery of how they are “many and yet one.” He is convinced that it is not even possible to isolate a black American tradition that exists independently of the other traditions which help shape the American character. He insists that the blacks are not African people, but Americans of eclectic cultural traditions and mixed bloodlines whose history and destiny are indigenous. This amply proves the fundamental dynamics and commitment of their art is constantly moving toward the black - white unity. All Americans, irrespective of their physical features share a common past and their destinies are inextricably intertwined. Baldwin says that the black American is “the world’s first genuine black Westerner.” (The Price 553) and he is the cultural bridge connecting Africa and the western world. Ellison’s hero
also asserts the same view when he declares, “we are Americans, all of us, whether black or white.” (I.M. 363)

Baldwin is thus committed to an identity that is not black, nor is it African - it is American. The significance of Alex Haley titling his book *Roots; The Saga of an American Family* should be seen in this context. Haley has used the epithet American judiciously since his book has set many whites “thinking about their own families and where they came from. With the exception of Red Indians all Americans have a place in the African continent to go back to. This vindicates the commitment of Baldwin.

Baldwin is exposed with equal vigour the shortcomings of the blacks as they did the weaknesses of the whites.“The first people to do Negroes damage are usually other Negroes.” (S.A. 71). Baldwin and Ellison condemned the ill treatment of blacks by whites. They also condemned the ill treatment of the blacks by other blacks. The blacks are “as a basket of crabs, wherein should one attempt to climb out, the others immediately pull him back.” (S.A. 91). They deplored petty-mindedness and selfishness wherever such qualities existed.

Baldwin was not obsessed with any political creed or sociological ideology. They were, in their earlier days, closely associated with and deeply involved in the affairs of the Communist Party. But they were disenchanted with it later. The journals of the party provided a forum for their social action and indeed they had their baptism in the world of letters on the planks of the
Communist press. Like their mentor Wright, they flirted with Communism for a short period and then kept themselves aloof from it. The Communists have not forgiven them for their desertion.

Richard Wright in his autobiography *Black Boy* mentions a number of authors who influenced his writings. Similarly, in their essays, Baldwin has acknowledged his indebtedness to these masters and added a few more writers like Dickens, James Joyce, Henry James, Hemingway and Emerson as writers who shaped their techniques and vision. Baldwin has also enumerated a host of black American and African authors and artists as the source of their inspiration. The Bible, slave memoirs and other material representing their oral tradition, folk tales, myths, the blues, the jazz, the spirituals and other forms of black culture also had their indelible mark on their writings.

The writings of Baldwin in turn have become a source of unfailing spur and sway to the writers of succeeding generation. Toni Morrison, Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka, Alice Walker, Ishmael Reed, Al Young, James Alan McPherson, John Wright, Albert Murray and Leon Forrest are but a few writers who have appreciated the inspiration and example provided by Baldwin and Ellison on their literary career and commitments.

There are critics both black and white who dogmatically assert that literature produced by black Americans is writing by blacks solely for blacks. The term ‘negritude’ as defined by Leopold Senghor as the sum total of the
value of the civilization of the African world and by Sartre in “Black Orpheus” as “black men ... addressing themselves to black men about black men” does not hold good to the black American writers as they no longer consider themselves, for historical reasons purely Africans. They identify themselves as hybrids of Africa and America and their literature is inseparable from the African and western literary traditions. Further what Sartre says about black writing in general as “actually a hymn by everyone for everyone”, is best applicable to the writings of Baldwin and Ellison, since they seek “to communicate a vision of experiences...” that “achieves its universality.” (G.T. 242). They thought of themselves not so much as blacks or even as Americans but as human persons. They stepped out into the universal from the narrow limits imposed by their skin colour and racial realities (Cited in Willfried F. Feuser, “Wole Soyinka: The Problem of Authenticity”, The Literary Half Yearly, Vol.XXVIII, No.2, July 1987, 205).

The whole American reality is based on the necessity of keeping black people out of it. The impact of race upon personality is very important for Baldwin and Ellison and the pain of being black in a white dominated society moves him” to literary expression. He is committed to articulate persuasively and artistically the various nuances of hurt and also to the eradication of racial injustice and social inequalities. The evaluation of his writings should be done in terms of what he has made of his pain and hurt artistically.
Baldwin has been called “Uncle Tom.” Some critics have deplored him by stating that he shirks his responsibilities as black victim and that he is too sanguine about the possibilities of human freedom in America. To an ordinary black American there “is a bitter irony in the picture of his country championing freedom in foreign lands and failing to ensure that freedom to twenty million of its own. Baldwin was aware of the incongruities and absurdities of American democracy” (James Baldwin, “Baldwin Interview”, Essence (March 1988, 117).

But his aim was not the destruction of the world. He intended to revamp the society and to have continuity side by side with systematic structural changes with abiding faith in the American dream, in the future of mankind and in the human, capacity for renewal. He has, from his experiences, captured in his writings those forms that characterize racial situation in America and the lessons that are to be drawn by the posterity. Especially he has delineated the changes in black consciousness contributing to the evolution of a new and just social order.

In his writings one can see the signs of a turning point in black art and culture. There is now a greater freedom in the way the blacks regard themselves.

A number of things that gave Baldwin great cause for grave concern in America have changed. The conscience of white America and as a consequence some of the aspects of American legality have changed. There is integration everywhere. Buses and public conveniences are no longer segregated. Black Senators, Mayors and other elected officials dot the land. A black American,
Senator Dilman, President pro tempore of the Senate becoming the President of the U.S.A., after the death of the President, Vice-President and the Speaker of the House of Representatives may no longer be just an adventitious occurrence in a novel.\textsuperscript{18} Rev. Jesse Jackson, just missed the chance of being nominated to the race for President ship of the U.S.A. by the Democratic Party in ’1988. The day a black American becoming the President of the U.S. A. is not remote .and as a promising reality of the dream dreamt by Baldwin an African American Barac Obama has succeeded in becoming the president of America.

The commitments and the concerted efforts of Baldwin and his writings have contributed a great deal to usher in those changes.

Baldwin’s views may seem a closed book with nothing more to be expected from him, but investigations into them should go on. On the other hand, Baldwin continues to write, and therefore continues to grow.

Further studies depends on the explorating how the emphasis of Baldwin and Ellison on the autonomy of black American culture and its inseparability is endorsed or spurned by the writers who have come after him.

Baldwin has called for the attention to the absurdities at work within American society. Investigations may be undertaken how he has influenced the other writers in their efforts to do away with such abnormalities in American life.

Studies may be undertaken on their efforts to discover and rebuild black folklore, oral tradition, black music, and their inevitable interaction with the rest
of American culture and how of succeeding decades have exploited these resources and enriched American literature.

Baldwin is committed to the idea that black American experience is a synthesis of African and western experience but it is nonetheless a universal experience. Investigations to show how far this idea has been assimilated or rejected by writers, both black and white and if so, why, may be of great significance. A study on the impact of the writings of Baldwin on the themes and techniques of the succeeding generation of writer will go a long way in vindicating the success and fulfillment of the commitments of Baldwin.