CHAPTER – III
A BIO-CRITICAL VIEW

James Arthur Baldwin, raised out of the racial nightmare of Harlem to carve a permanent niche for himself in American letters, is easily the most gifted and the most disturbing artist of distinction to have appeared in the history of black American literature. “I would place him very high among writers,” said Benjamin DeMott, “in part because his work showed a powerful commitment to the right values and had a profound impact for good on our culture” (Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 50.83).

He was a writer of daring and dignity and his soul witnessed a tug-of-war between two uncompromising urges – one yearning for his African roots and the other lamenting over and rejoicing in its American heritage of insult and injury, of freedom and possibility.

Self-exile was the way shown by his mentor Richard Wright to flee from the fear and rage of American realities. Baldwin sought a home away from home in Paris. But he could neither wean himself completely from the happening in his native land nor accomplish an enduring truce between his warring urges. He remained a trans-Atlantic commuter for four decades. In this predicament lay the complexity of his fate and the commitments of his life and writings.

Baldwin is well known for his unique literary style characterized by poetic profusion and power. He is also remembered as an ardent civil rights crusader, a
polished pamphleteer, a racial rhetorician, a witness who committed himself to the sacred task of giving testimony to what he had seen, and a prophet praying to God to be merciful and praying for humanity to transform itself before God metes out His final justice. “Baldwin speaks boldly as a Negro – that is to say, as a human being while recognizing his responsibility to the craft he practices” (Granville Hicks. “Commitment without Compromise” Saturday Review.9).

He employed more than one prose type and several of the communication media, the newspaper, the theatre and the printed book in order to keep is voice heard and to amuse, stun, exhilarate and exasperate the readers. He was an accusing finger thrust in the face of white America. His function as a writer was irksome and so were his commitments. After all, to write, if taken seriously, is to be subversive and to disturb the peace. The writer does not merely record what happens; he probes. Although Baldwin had earned a reputation for being a harsh critic, and for exposing the grit and grime in American race relations, he was actually most committed to the problems and possibilities of finding and holding love. He desired not only having the truth but seeing the reason why it was true by dispassionately probing for sources, causes and consequences. Thus, Baldwin’s deep concern was with one’s past and the past of one’s country or race as the starting point for understanding the present and foreseeing possible future developments.
Baldwin was, therefore, committed to exploring a wide spectrum of topics such as the responsibility of the writer to promote the evolution of the individual and society; the indivisibility of private life and the public life; the essential need to develop sexual and psychological consciousness and identity; the past historical significance and the current potential explosiveness of color consciousness and the racial crisis; the need for demythologizing the prevailing ethos of American history, religion and culture; and the intertwining of love and power in the universal scheme of existence as well as in society’s structures. (F.L. Standley and L.H. Praat, op. cit., viii).

He published six novels, two plays, eight books of essays, a Rap on race with Margaret Mead, a Dialogue with Nikki Giovanni, a book of short stories, a collection of poems, a book for children, a film scenario based on the *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and a number of articles, interviews and book reviews in leading journals. During the 1980’s three major projects occupied him: a novel *Petals for Mohammed*, and a play, *The Welcome Table* and a triple biography of the martyrs Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., to which he gave the tentative title *Remember This House*.

It is interesting to note that Baldwin intended writing, in the early 1950’s, a slave novel, set on the Emancipation Day in 1863, provisionally entitled *Talking at the Gates* in which he meant “to explore his belief that black and white in America were bound by strong ties, including blood ties, and that it was
the pathological denial of these bonds, as opposed to actual differences, that fuelled the racial nightmare” (James Campbell, Talking at the Gates: New York Viking, 1991.9.135). This indicates Baldwin’s life-long commitment to work for racial integration in America.

When analyzed together his writings express his fundamental outlook and interests, there is a thematic homogeneity of his writings, theme of commitment is a consistent, and the most pervasive one in Baldwin’s work and it has shaped and dominated his life and art. Baldwin established a reputation as a man of letters and his prolific and provocative writings, so voluminous, so diverse, remain a revelation of his life and his commitments. The great contribution of Mr. Baldwin is that he finds words to express what one knows to be true: how it feels to be an American Negro.

James Baldwin had a singularly unhappy childhood. He was born in the year 1924 in Harlem. Harlem is geographically part of the U.S., but sociologically an island surrounded by the rest of the country. Berdis Emma Jones, his mother, who worked as a domestic servant married David Baldwin in 1927 when Baldwin was just three years old. David Baldwin was a sternly authoritarian religious fanatic who had migrated from Neo Orleans to New York. Young James thus acquired a name, a providing patron but not a benevolent father figure. His illegitimacy obsessed him from the time he first learned about it in his boyhood right to the end of his life. He did not blame his mother in any
way for bringing him into the world illegitimate; he was always very tender about her. He was a bastard child. He realized gradually why his father was rarely pleased with him. David Baldwin despised and taunted his stepson for his illegitimacy, his uncouth appearance and later, his independence of spirit.

His mother provided whatever compensatory affection she could, but her eight additional children born over the next sixteen years and her work in white people’s kitchen left her little time to spend on her first-born. In such a family situation, it is little wonder that Baldwin’s major literary theme was quest for love and commitment. Love, for Baldwin, embodies the only redemptive power capable of helping man in defining his humanness. “You have lots of brothers and sisters” his mother used to say, “You don’t know what’s going to happen to them. So you’re to treat everybody like your brothers and sisters. Love them” (Carolyn W.Sylvander, James Baldwin; New York: Frederic Ungar Publishing Co., 1980, 3).

Baldwin’s earliest years were a period of such unrelieved anguish that survival preoccupied him completely, delaying even recognition of the racial problem. His family life was emotionally depleting, economically deprived socially oppressed like that of a host of Harlem families. The most that could be expected of such family was physical survival. The vicissitudes and vices of the neighbourhood in which the survival had to be achieved left an indelible impression on Baldwin’s mind, first as evidence of the wages of sin, and later as
the indicators of a racial bigotry. From such nightmarish reality, some escape was needed, some sustenance offering spiritual solace and physical safety and emotional release. For the blacks this solace was the storefront church where David Baldwin preached.

Baldwin found his solace in books. He would sit at a table with a child in one hand and a book in the other. He stepped himself in literature: devouring books as though they were ambrosia and for him, they were. David Baldwin had eternal love for God as the major passion of his life, mercilessly; he strove to inculcate his faith in all the members of his family, not always with success. He was undoubtedly the most important influence on young Baldwin’s life. It was from his father who played Jekyll and Hyde – a pious, peace-loving preacher on the pulpit and a lust-driven monster at home – that Baldwin acquired his detailed knowledge of the Bible, which was to affect his thinking and his style until he died. Baldwin learned that he was ugly which made him reserved and uncertain of himself for years. It was from his relationship with David Baldwin that he developed his obsession about rebelling against father figures that was to make his relations with such veterans as Richard Wright so difficult. His stepfather’s aggressive, often cruel dominance encouraged his homosexuality. He wished to rebel in every way. As he grew bigger, David Baldwin changed into someone to dread.
For James, religious faith was a ruse to protect himself from the dangers of the street, to placate his stepfather, and finally to defeat him by excelling him in his own ministerial vocation. Whatever the motives, his intense emotional commitment to religion made James Baldwin an enduring literary luminary of religious subjects and imagery and a hortatory style, and high moral seriousness. His novels deal explicitly with religious experience and most of his writings derive titles or epigraphs from spirituals or scriptures. School also relieved Baldwin from the stresses of home and enabled him to escape from his domineering stepfather. His diminutive size and precocity made him the essay target of schoolyard bullies; but his intellectual prowess helped to sustain him. A voracious reader, Baldwin read all the masterpieces and attempted to satiate his unquenchable thirst for knowledge.

He managed to overcome the difficulties of the actual world of home, street, church and school with the imaginary realm of book, play and film. He drew inspiration and encouragement from his teachers such as the poet Countee Cullen. Baldwin longed to become a writer. Before this ambition could be fulfilled, however, he had to confront sexual and religious crises, about which he has written at length in his novels. He could overcome the temptations of fresh only through a transcendent religious experience. It led him to the pulpit, where, as a boy-minister at the age of fourteen he could be the instrument of salvation for others. His histrionic gifts enabled him to outdo the more austere evangelical
style of his stepfather. His popularity as a young preacher finally overwhelmed him. While his religious experience tentatively solved the moral issues of self, family and society his sense of reality. As the voice of skeptical, secular intelligence the pulpit and church, he was to become a ruthless critic of Christianity. The actual principles of the religious practices “were Blindness, Loneliness and Terror, the first principles necessarily and actively cultivated in order to deny the two others. I would love to believe that the principles were Faith, Hope and Charity” (34-35). The historical role of Christianity in legitimizing the ill-treatment of black people, as well as its stultifying effect on their lives, was to receive his bitter condemnation.

He lost faith in the Church; his family situation deteriorated, his father sank into madness, but his literary aspirations were still rising. He felt that he had to leave Harlem in order to survive. He secured employment as a defense worker in New Jersey. He found himself in an extremely hostile racial environment, which seemed to confirm his stepfather’s bottomless resentment of whites. He realized the dangers of being a black in America. This exposure produced a dread. His rage culminated in a violent confrontation in a Jim Crow diner in which he was ready to murder or be murdered.

Called back to New York because of his stepfather’s fatal illness, Baldwin was now more prone to understand the role of white racism in shaping the black condition. On the day after the funeral, August 2, 1943, which was also
Baldwin’s 19th birthday, Harlem erupted in a riot occasioned by the shooting of a black technician by a white policeman. Baldwin had come to see in the riots the marks of racial oppression and discrimination.

He went to Greenwich Village to begin his career as a writer. Racial and sexual problems persisted, besides the problems of penury while he was undergoing his literary apprenticeship. However precariously, Baldwin managed to survive his years in the village and to make contacts that were to prove useful in his literary endeavours. He published a few book reviews for the *Nation* and the *New Leader*, in 1949, his most famous essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” denounced the use of fiction as a tool of social change. In his reviews of novels, which dealt with racial protest, he complained of over simplification and sentimentality about race.

Baldwin may be regarded as the first black American writer to alienate himself from the lone enduring black institution, the black church. He is known for his candid and persistent portrayal of its lack of authentic Christian commitment. He came to the conclusion that there was no love in the Church. To him religion was a mask for racial animosity and a shelter for despondency. The church that fails to save the body of a man from starvation can never redeem his soul from damnation. He concluded that he should abandon his connections with the church that was devoid of love and that looked like a house built on the rock of despair. The conception ‘that white man’s God is white’ was inexorable, and
the implications were clear. During the period of his early conversion, he wondered why, if white God loved all His children, the black children were rejected.

The problem further raises the question about why black people are religious, that is, Christian, in spite of the relatedness of Christianity to their enslavement. They yet greatly admire God, whom they inherited from their God-fearing slave owners. Baldwin says that “There are probably more churches in Harlem than in any other ghetto” (The Harlem Ghetto, Notes on a Native Son: Boston Beacon Press, 1955, 65).

Baldwin does not spare black church from his criticism. It too subtly but surely preaches hatred of whites. But his major attack is against white Christians, who so deliberately and shamelessly throw moral virtues to the winds to gain power and political leverage. Baldwin avers that the white Christian has robbed the African of his history and his religion. Baldwin believed that man, in order to become a truly moral human being must first free himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church. He was convinced that the church should make us better, more loving toward all.

Baldwin recognized the distribution between sociology and aesthetics. He is thus among those black American writers for whom simple protest and anger were not enough. Baldwin condemned protest fiction in his essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel” in which he found fault with the motives of Harriet Beecher
Stowe and her opus *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Baldwin denied that such writing can be justified on the basis that it serves the good of society. The novel employs biblical quotations, hymns, sermons and scriptural emblems and as a critic aptly put it, Stowe rewrites the Bible as the story of a Negro slave. Baldwin’s view that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* combines the tradition of the sentimental novel and the rhetoric of antislavery polemic and that it is activated by a theological terror in which black equals with evil and white grace is amply endorsed by Richard Yarborough who in his article entitled “Strategies of Black Characterization in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the Early Afro-American Novel” opines that “Although Stowe unquestionably sympathized with the slaves, her commitment to challenging the claim of black inferiority was frequently undermined by her own endorsement of racial stereotypes” (Quoted in New Essays on Uncle Tom’s Cabin ed. J. Sundquist; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986, 47).

Baldwin rejected overt racial conflict, though not race, as a literary theme. When he was preparing his first major creative efforts, Baldwin met Richard Wright in 1945. Wright read his manuscript, praised his talent and helped Baldwin get a Eugene F. Saxton Memorial Trust Award, his first real literary recognition. Baldwin confessed that he looked upon Wright as a father-figure. But, for Baldwin a father-figure was by definition what one rebelled against in order to establish one’s own identity. He criticized Wright’s famous works and rejected in his reviews of those books the Wrightian model of protest fiction.
Wright felt betrayed and Baldwin defended himself saying that all literature may be protest but not all protest was literature.

In three essays particularly “Everybody’s Protest Novel” (1949), “Many Thousands Gone” (1955) and “Alas, Poor Richard” (1962) Baldwin had openly acknowledged his affection for Wright, who became for him a “spiritual father.” The anticipated relationship between the fledgling and the idol could not be sustained because of the deep and irreconcilable differences between their commitments. Two major points were responsible for the rupture: first, Wright’s contention that Baldwin had “betrayed him and not only him but all American Negroes by attacking the idea of protest literature,” and second Baldwin’s contention that Wright refused to accept “my right to my own vision, my right, as his equal, to disagree with him” (James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My name; New York: Delhi publications, 1961, 156-159).

In “Many Thousands Gone” Baldwin concentrates all of his rhetorical power in a massive attack on the validity of Wright’s purpose in the creation of Native Son, with its monster protagonist Bigger. Although he admits that “the most powerful and celebrated statement we have yet had of what it means to be a black in America is unquestionably. Richards Wright’s Native Son.” (N.N.S. 30). Baldwin unfairly contends that at the end of the novel the readers know more about the monster Bigger than they did at the beginning and, likewise they know scarcely anything new about the social condition, which is supposed to
have created him. Baldwin is sore about the fact that an important dimension of black life is omitted namely, “the relationship that Negroes bear to one another that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience.” (N.N.S. 35)

Wright’s aim was to confront the readers with the protagonist Bigger created by the American republic and to make them share Bigger’s experiences and to arouse in them the feelings of pity and horror at his inevitable doom.

Consistently adhering to the idea that the reality of man is more than a social reality and that the artist is rendered sterile who deals with man only in social terms, Baldwin has described Wright as a victim of the war between blackness and whiteness. Baldwin was of the opinion that Wright, when he died was acquiring a new tone, and a new depth and that in the collection of short stories *Eight Men* “Wright’s unrelentingly bleak landscape was not merely that of the Deep South or of Chicago, but that of the world, of the human heart.” (N.K.M.N. 149)

Baldwin was unaware in his early years of the necessity for various kinds of protest as a socially committed artist struggles to bring to life the compelling vision that his personal and social experiences offered. He was skeptical about Wright’s self-imposed exile. He accused Wright of arrogance and condescension toward blacks, of hypocrisy, of really not wanting to know the problems of this
Black Country men in France, because, “his real impulse toward American Negroes, individually, was to despise them.” (N.K.M.N. 168)

Baldwin liked America too much to abandon it. He feared white Americans too much to live with them. He also likes Wright, found exile as the only way available to him. “I left America because I doubted my ability to survive the fury of the color problems.” (N.K.M.N. 17) Baldwin suffered from a double alienation; as a black he could not see eye to eye with the white society that oppressed him and at the same time he could not identify with the black society. If he had been born in the south, he might have come to New York, but being born in New York, he had no place to go in America. He had to go out.

While on the continent, Baldwin was able to come to terms with himself and to reassess his own country, for which he has several times asserted his love. In cutting himself loose from America, he had hoped to obliterate the psychology of the outcast. It was in Europe that he became an American. He had to leave America in order to realize that he was part of it, or that it was a part of him. What became clear to him, as the result of this European exile, was the fact of his blackness and his Americanness. “I found myself, willy-nilly, alchemized into an American the moment I touched French soil” (N.K.M.N. 75).

As a writer, there was no way of escaping his role in a revolution. It demanded a great deal of stepping out of social situation in order to deal with it. And all the time he was out of it, he could not help feeling a little guilty that he
was not, as it were, on the frontline, so he decided to terminate his self-imposed exile in France. He decided to stop indulging in elegant despair far removed from the scenes of racial conflict. As a committed artist, he could not justifiably pontificate from a distance on the viciousness of racism while he kept himself comfortably protected from its immediate effects.

*Go Tell It on the Mountain* was published in 1953 to critical acclaim. Two more books *Notes of Native Son* and *Giovanni’s Room* appeared before he returned to America to live in July 1957. The Supreme Court decision of 1954 outlawed racial segregation in public education and at the end of the following year Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., launched a bus boycott in Alabama. Throughout the south, blacks were being brutalized at will and murdered with impunity as white racists rallied their forces in opposition to racial integration. Expatriation seemed to Baldwin an evasion of his social commitment.

Baldwin undertook an extensive tour of the south and met numerous leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Baldwin through his essays, addressed mainly white Americans pleading fervently for their understanding support of the black struggle. He was recognized as a major spokesman of the Civil Rights Crusade. He became a genuine celebrity through his writings, lectures and plays and acquired name, fame and material prosperity. But Baldwin never lost his sense of racial outrage. He put American civilization to a merciless scrutiny with abiding faith in the healing power of love. The police violence and racial killings
of many leaders including Martin Luther King Jr., have all but extinguished hope. And with this termination of hope came profound disillusionment and exile. Till his death in 1987 he had been commuting between Europe and America. “I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly, for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.” (N.N.S. 9).

Baldwin claims the right to love America even though she feeds him bread of bitterness. Despite all his years in Europe, he had never sounded like an expatriate. He realized that he had been an inseparable part of America, for better or worse, and did not belong to any other, not to Africa. He had no hesitation in asserting that “the black and white deeply need each other here if we are really to became a nation.” (T.F.N.T. p. 83)

Baldwin was committed to exploring the quality of black suffering, to expose the racial and sexual polarization of his society and to challenge the readers to confront and resolve these aberrations. His writings “attest to his premise that the black American, as an object of suffering and abuse, represents a universal symbol of human conflict.” Baldwin, therefore, aimed at the portrayal of the black people’s suffering in America. This portrayal is based on his own experience and the history of his people and their culture.

In order to fulfill this commitment the artist should be open-minded and aware of the experiences which appear to the common man both fragmented and chaotic. Baldwin thought that the artist is dedicated to a special vocation whose
value never diminishes. This special task involves both personal and social responsibility. His subject is himself and he attempts to look on himself and the world as they are. The writer is also responsible to and for the social order, and his task must be pervaded by an ethical vision and historical orientation that includes “a responsibility, not only to ourselves and to own time, but to those who are coming after us” (N.K.M.N. 1899).

Baldwin pleads for a profound recognition and acceptance of the tragedy of life and to be truly alive is to be prepared to risk everything and to love is to be willing to give entirely of oneself. His commitment was to expose with candor and acerbity what it means to be black in a world dominated by white power in social, political, religious, artistic and ethical matters. His faith in remaking America into what it should be was unshakable. Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.

Baldwin grew up suffering hateful mistreatment, entrapment, exploitation and condescension and so he acquired the habit of referring to himself as though he were the personification of his race, embodying in himself the history, the attributes and the tragedy of the black American. He believed that the blacks are responsible for their freedom, and they are not begging for it, for freedom is not something that is given or granted, it should be taken or won. Freedom is unattainable since “freedom is discovery and recognition of limitations, one’s own and that of one’s society.” In the process of winning freedom one would
have to hold in the mind forever two ideas which seemed to be in opposition. “The first idea was acceptance, the acceptance, totally without rancor, of life as it is, and men as they are: in the light of this idea ………..injustice is a common place…….. The second idea was of equal power: that one must never, in one’s own life, accept these injustices as common place but must fight them with all one’s strength.” (N.N.S. 113-224)

The effort to become a great novelist “involves attempting to tell as much of the truth as one can bear, and then a little more.” Commitments to these obligations compelled Baldwin to attack much that Americans tend to hold sacred in order to confront reality and to change it constructively. It meant devotion to “human being, his freedom and fulfillment; freedom which cannot be legislated, fulfillment which cannot be chartered.” (N.N.S. 15). When one is out of touch with oneself, one cannot touch other. Questions of self-discovery have tended for most other writers to be of more or less philosophical or aesthetic significance, the issue for Baldwin tended to assume enormity, since it has had everything to do with his very survival as a social being. The creative imagination for him seemed to be nothing but a vehicle of self-assertion in a world that conspired to deny meaning of his life.

Self-discovery is never an entirely private battle; it can be achieved only in communion with others. The bridge of suffering can enable one to define oneself through a committed, compassionate and reciprocal understanding of the others.
This idea of achieving self-discovery through recognition and acceptance of another’s humanity is examined in Baldwin’s novels. The capacity for communication with the commitment to another individual is the core element of genuine love.

Self-discovery is also dependent in identification of the individual self with group experience and tradition. Hence, communal identification plays a crucial role in Baldwin’s writings. He implies that for an individual to accept himself and develop a healthy ability to commune with another, he must come to terms with his racial past. The individual while strengthening the community draws strength from it in turn. Thus an individual’s quest for self-discovery and meaning ultimately involves a return to identification with and commitment to his community, his group tradition. He can achieve a genuine sense of self only through his identification with the humanity within all men and women. And in a real sense all of Baldwin’s writings constitute a magnificent assertion of the oneness of the human spirit that unites the family of mankind.

Baldwin’s novels deal with the impact on the individual of the conditions of urban life and society. He treats the anonymity, impersonality the confinement and isolation of the city life. The quest for community is indispensable in Baldwin’s novels. This quest involves the discovery and the rejection of illusion about oneself, facing and fighting alienation and solitariness. Man is, after all, a gregarious animal. In order to define others and in order to relate with others he
must reveal his interior being. For Baldwin the galvanizing force for overcoming the isolation is love. Baldwin’s commitment to do away with racial segregation is to be seen in this light. Love is not an abstract spiritual entity. It is a life-suffering force and an invigorating tonic to a suffering humanity. For Baldwin writing was an act of love and communion, symbolizing an attempt to get in touch with others and to get their attention and admiration. The only significant realities are individuals and love, and these individuals pursue love, and anything that hinders the free operation of this fact is evil. He adds that if “the concept of God has any validity or use, it can only be to make us larger, freer and more loving.” (T.F.N.T. 46)

Racism may be seen as illustration of failure of love. If love is in part the willingness to accept the validity of another’s life, so is racism, the denial of another’s humanity. If love implies the ability to forgive, to be charitable, racial animosity is equally the inability to understand others and to be compassionate. Racism is a deadly battle, which affects the victor and the victim alike. It is like a festering wound that must be worked upon until it is opened and the pus can ran out. “It is like needling a blister until it bursts.” (N.N.S. 59)

It is not easy to be a black in America. One is victimized from the start by the colour of one’s skin. Society not only gives black people an inferior status but convinces them of their worthlessness. The stigma is stamped on the blackness of the Americans by the whites to rob the black men of their selfhood.
From the beginning, white America has absolved itself of responsibility, by selfishly and cruelly clinging to the dictum: what is not white is inferior. “This is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it.” (T.F.N.T. 14)

One cannot live without a past, but the black is stripped off his past in America. A person or community which does not know its past and parentage is handicapped by an inferiority feeling. The full human potential is haunted by a rootless past. Hatred and fear of whites are concomitant to life for the blacks. They nurture hatred for their own group and self-hatred too. Baldwin confesses that he himself at one time despised black people. He was “as isolated from Negroes as I was from whites, which is what happens when a Negro begins, at bottom, to believe what white people say about him.” (N.K.M.N. 17)

A black child is taught in his schoolbook that Africa had no history and that neither had he. It is not only that society thought of him as worthless and treated him as one, but that he himself believed it – that he never questioned what white people said of him. White America brainwashed itself into believing that the black reality is intellectually inferior and sexually superior. It has convinced itself that the black American is happy in his place. But Baldwin was committed to expose America’s systematic efforts to destroy blacks. It inculcates
fear. In challenging the white world’s assumption, the blacks put themselves in the path of destruction.

Baldwin declared that his most passionate concern-nay, obsession-was with race, “…… that one problem is a problem which has obsessed my life. And I have the feeling that one problem, the problem of colour in this country, has always contained the key to all other problems” (Margaret Mead and James Baldwin, A Rap on Race; Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1971, 69).

There is no one in the country better able to reach the conscience of America than Baldwin. Repeatedly, he stressed the economic motives behind segregation and the commercial benefits white America derived from maintaining blacks as a source of cheap labour. Exploitations take place as a result of man’s reluctance to face the truth about his own nature. This is a kind of myopia. Men erect an elaborate façade of myth, tradition and ritual and hide their true motives. It is this distorted vision, which has created and perpetuated the vicious racism that threatens to destroy America.

Blacks grew up with a great wall built between themselves and whites and it makes whites strange, different from other. And whatever is “other” is frightening. The entire society reinforces this difference so that the blacks have to be afraid of the whites. And if they are afraid of the whites, the blacks have got to hate the whites. These restrictions and their effects are inexplicable and invisible whereas his skin is not. And it is his skin that predetermines the attitude
of white strangers. His colour makes him simultaneously conspicuous and anonymous.

Mrs. Ayer, the principal of his school who made him believe, “that I was not necessarily what the country said I was”, inspired Baldwin. (Ibid.6-7). But at the same time it was a white teacher who encouraged him and hence became for Baldwin “my first key, my first clue that white people were human”(William J.Wealtherby, Squaring Clark. The Negro Protest: Broston Beacon Press, 1963, 24). Then he concluded that at the root of the American racial problem is the need of the white people to find a way of living with the blacks in order to be able to live with them. Baldwin’s this realization did much to reduce the bitterness and tension in racial discourse and helped create a cordial atmosphere in racial relations. Along with Martin Luther King Jr., he helped shape the idealism upon which the civil-rights protest of the sixties was based. As a spokesman for his race, Baldwin found himself winning international reputation. Although committed to stress the cause of the blacks and his own outrage, he still remained an impartial human being. He was critical of both blacks and whites. He lamented that black people, “mainly look down or look up but do not look at each other, not at you, and white people, mainly look away.” (T.F.N.T. 33-34)

Baldwin used the essay as his anvil for his fiction, both novels and short stories. Go Tell It on the Mountain, Baldwin’s first and his best novel, examines three generations of a black family whose life span extends from slavery to the
present day. It is autobiographical and it is the story of a Harlem youth, John Grimes, who undergoes a religious experience on his fourteenth birthday. It narrates the story of John’s stepfather Gabriel, a fanatical zealot whose power scars the lives of all who come near him. It is likewise the story of Florence, Gabriel’s sister and of Elizabeth his present wife and John’s mother. The various stories illuminate each other in their psychological intimacy. They also exemplify almost a century of black American social experience. The common denominators of the experience are sex, race and religion, precisely those elements with which John must contend with to achieve maturity and self-definition.

Gabriel refuses to accept of love John. Pampered and protected by his mother, John lavishes his love on her. Ridiculed and rejected by his stepfather, he reciprocates with fierce hatred. Symbolically emasculated by Gabriel, John turns to a slightly older, more virile youth, Elisha, for compensating affection, John ends up securing a homosexual surrogate. Thus, John’s severe Oedipus complex propels him toward homosexuality.

John can achieve self-realization only when he accepts his blackness without associating it with ugliness, dirt and humiliation. Ashamed of his uncouth appearance, his colour, his ghetto environment, he has longed for the cleanliness and order of the white world. John’s racial shame implies an indictment of the white racism responsible for it. On the threshing floor of the
Temple of the Fire Baptized, John comes to a tentative racial self-acceptance when he hears a sound that came from darkness, the sound of the black past of suffering and victimization. He hears this sound, in the mood of religious transport. Reviled by his stepfather who thinks of John as the son of the bondwoman and rejected because of the race by the country of which he is a native son, he turns to God. John’s ecstatic moment is genuine, moving him through shame and hatred to love and peace. Yet all the implications of his commitments are that John will finally have no abandon religion to engage the world, just as he must leave the church to reenter the Harlem streets.

The search for self is presented mainly in sexual terms in Giovanni’s Room, Baldwin’s second novel. It is a book without the presence of a single black and it was among the first American novels to explore the subject of homosexuality with the same candour permitted for discussion of heterosexual love. The story is about two expatriate bisexuals David an American and Giovanni an Italian both living in Paris and David’s girl friend Hella. David, loyal to his parents, keen to marry, start a family and launch a career, struggles with the questions of commitment. Having lost his mother when he was five, David suffers from a recurrent nightmare involving her. He was filled with shame and remorse at his father’s drunken affairs with women. A brief, homosexual encounter with Joey compounds the confusion of the family situation. In an effort to find himself, David goes to France. There he meets
Hella, an apprentice painter who leaves him to travel through Spain in order to evaluate their relationship, and Giovanni, working as a bartender at a homosexual resort presided over by Guillaume, a corrupt and shrewd scion of an aristocratic family. David moves into Giovanni’s small, cluttered room; a genuine affection of their homosexual relationship is described vividly. His fear to commit himself fully to their love, constitutes a betrayal on David’s part that drives Giovanni to desperation and finally to the murder of Guillaume. Apprehended, Giovanni awaits the guillotine while David, overwhelmed by guilt, strives to restore his relationship with Hella. David, who is inhibited by the social taboo of the love of one man for another is tormented by his own innate incapacity to accept love when he finds it. The action boils down to a choice confronting David: commitment to Giovanni he loves or compromises with Hella, his fiancé. Heterosexuality a culturally sanctioned and socially prescribed pattern is accepted and commitments to human beings and to the deepest urgings of one’s own nature are denied.

### Another Country

*Another Country* unfolds panoramic perspectives of New York City, where even the weather contributes to the human frailties and rattles the nerves with its relentless heat and noise, engendering hostilities and frustration. It is a place, run entirely for money, and by money. Its citizens seem to be robots. They appear to have no sense of their right to renew themselves. In such an environment, the search for love of the major characters is destined to bear no
fruits, since the reality of their lives is conditioned by betrayal, evasion, hatred, and violence.

*Another Country* besides presenting its portrayal of a city tells the interrelated lives of eight major characters. Rufus Scott, a black jazz musician fallen on evil days commits suicide, but his memory haunts the minds of his friends, most of whom consider themselves to be in some degree responsible for his untimely death.

The problems of Rufus arise from his uncommitted affair with Leona, a sincere, but indigent white refugee from the south whom he drives to a nervous breakdown. Vivaldo Moore a writer falls in love with Ida, the sister of Rufus. Ida a rising blues singer is a beautiful embittered girl mourning her brother but determined to survive urban jungle by any means necessary. Richard and Cass Silensvi are another oddly matched pair. In contrast with Vivaldo’s efforts to write a meaningful work of fiction, Richard, his former teacher brings out an inept and worthless murder mystery. This literary prostitution costs Richard the respect of his wife, who admires Ida and Vivaldo. She then has an affair with Eric Jones, a homosexual, an actor who has recently returned from France leaving his male lover Yves, a Paris street boy. Eric had earlier been involved homosexually with Rufus, and after Cass, he makes love to Vivaldo while waiting for Yves to join him in New York. Bills, the T.V. magnate who promises to promote Ida’s career, treats Ida like a whore.
The human craving for love and the difficulty of satisfying in the urban milieu is the theme of the novel. It amplifies the themes of *Giovanni’s Room*, namely the healing power of love and the difficulty of accepting it. But there is a good deal more sex – interracial, extra-marital, heterosexual, and homosexual.

The failure to find a satisfactory affirmative answer drives Rufus to suicide, Leona to a mental asylum, Ida to the unloving arms of a television executive, Vivaldo to a delusion and to realize that their commitment to Rufus was not strong enough to save him from his suicide. Rufus, who dies at the end of the first chapter, becomes a central figure for the other characters.

The novel is based on the assumption that the most tantalizing realities that the Americans have to deal with are race and sex. Each individual is an island, separated from others by race, sex or nationality. For any human being to reach out to another, sincere effort is necessary. The effort intensifies in direct proportion to the level of commitment. Ida, for example, is afraid to love black men as she has seen too many of them destroyed. But she cannot love white man either. Ever her involvement with Vivaldo is to torment him.

The message of the novel is that blacks and whites must go to or create Another Country in order to regenerate the one they have. Since they cannot seek another country in Europe or Africa, it is America itself, which is another country. They must look inward. Six of the major characters are artists. They
must create harmony out of the ever present chaos of avarice, betrayal and perversion. Success attends where commitment reigns.

In the next novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Tish and Fonny, young black lovers are in conflict with a hostile urban society but are sustained by their love for each other. Falsely imprisoned on a charge of raping a Puerto Rican woman, Fonny must struggle to retain his sanity while Tish, a perfume sales assistant in a downtown shop, pregnant by him, struggles against time and a corrupt legal system to free her man before their child is born. In this effort she is supported by her parents and sister and Fonny’s father, although Fonny’s mother Mrs. Hunt and his sisters turn their backs on the trouble.

Fonny is a sensitive artist at odds with society. In the abrupt conclusion of the novel the baby has been born and Fonny is out on bail, although his legal fate is still uncertain. Nevertheless, life has been renewed through love despite all the malevolent forces of a corrupt and racist society. The affirmative conclusion is to be inferred.

For Mrs. Hunt church is a shelter and people like her are recluses who do not wish to face their problems. Baldwin indicts their apathy and disapproves the philosophy of waiting for the Lord’s will to be done, their wallowing in guilt over imaginary crimes and their futile wailings. Tish’s sister Ernestine like her parents is equally committed to saving Fonny. She provides a pleasant contrast to Adrienne and Sheilla, who are Fonny’s non-caring sisters. The good ones,
altruistic and Christ like in their dedication and commitment deserve Baldwin’s praise.

The coming together of Tish, Fonny, Tish’s parents, sister and Fonny’s father for commitment to and preservation of their love despite all obstacles, especially those represented by laws and courts presents an edifying spectacle in the novel. They symbolize the comments of the individuals who have been wronged and believe that wrong can and should be righted.

Baldwin’s attitudes have evolved from an effort at disengagement in his youth to fervent commitment to the redemptive power of inter-racial action for civil rights during 1950’s to endorsement of black revolutionary nationalism during 1960’s, to a bitterly pessimistic awaiting of retributive vengeance on the white racism of America that characterized his position in the 1970’s and 1980’s.

In *Fire Next Time* Baldwin argues: Before blacks can be liberated from their condition, they must liberate whites from their racism by accepting them with love. Baldwin also sheds light on his youthful conversion, ministerial career, and rejection of Christianity because of the implausibility of its doctrines and the crimes committed in its name. He offers a report on his meeting in Chicago with the Honourable Elijah Muhammad and a sympathetic assessment of the black Muslims from a nonbeliever’s point of view and an analysis of American racial relations in the context of national history and contemporary international politics. Baldwin’s commitment as exemplified in this section is
that black people are in a position to teach white people to give up their delusions of superiority and to confront the national political realities to eliminate racism as a necessary condition or survival. “If the blacks and whites do not end the racial nightmare and change the history of the world, the fulfillment of that prophecy, recreated from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time.” (T.F.N.T. 89)

An even more emphatic endorsement of violence as a legitimate weapon of the racially oppressed appears in the novel *Tell Me How Long the Trani’s Been Gone.* In the concluding scene of the novel the protagonist, Leo Proudhammer agrees, still somewhat reluctantly, with his friend-lover Christopher, a black nationalist, that, however out-numbered, they require guns.

Whatever the particular circumstances, Leo’s all consuming emotion is fear, as he confesses to the reader many a time. Lying on his back in his dressing room after his heart attack, Leo realizes that his life revealed a very frightened man. In this childhood, he was afraid of the friends of his brother Caleb. On the subways, he first felt what may be called a civic terror. Leo realizes that terror and trouble are the two inseparable elements of his life’s experiences. Such all-pervasive fear coupled with bisexuality, the father figure, the guest for love, and tirade against racism and loveless religion constitute the main plank of the novel.

Leo Proudhammer, a famous actor suffers a hear attack in the midst of his role one evening on a stage in a theatre in San Francisco. Accompanied by
Barbara King, his white mistress and fellow-player, Proudhammer is rushed to a local hospital. Having recovered from his illness, he leaves the hospital, goes to New York and then to Europe to rest as well as recuperate. Sometime afterward, he returns to America, resumes his work as an actor. The story is filled with a variety of episodes. The story is developed not by classical associationism, but by errant association-errant in that the connection between the various episodes is left for the reader to guess or supply for himself. The one thing all the episodes have in common is the protagonist’s direct or indirect involvement in them, Proudhammer is thus the unifying force in the story and his commitment to his brother Caleb Barbara and to Christopher is the emotional centre of the novel.

The main character Arthur Montana in *Just Above My Head* is a gospel singer. Hall, his elder brother, tells his story. To remember Arthur is to remember Jimmy, Arthur’s lover. And to remember Jimmy is to contemplate Julia, his elder sister and a former child-preacher with whom Hall once had an affair. Julia’s mother Amy supports Julia’s claim to the ministry as revealing her precocity. She begins to look up on Julia as a grounded angel. The problem is that Julia is not content to the messenger of God, she is trying to play God and this brings a power that expects tolerance from others. She falls to save her mother because of her indifference. Two days after her mother is buried, her father Joel, violates her.
Julia, the living example of transcending of the most excruciating kind of physical and emotional pain, that of incest, fascinates Hall by her ability to break the rules and to survive nonetheless. Uncertain about growing up, hesitant about her ministry and guilty about her mother’s untimely death, she submits to her private purgatory. In another ironic and incestuous twist, Julia is helped along the road to recovery by engaging in a sexual act with Crunch, who has been Arthur’s first homosexual lover.

Julia is brought to the south to join her brother Jimmy. She takes up modeling and then makes a trip to Africa. She causes destruction within her own family as long as she is fanatically involved and tries to redefine religion in terms of secular commitment to family and friends that she is able to grow in ways that win approval from Hall, as well as from the readers too. Contrary to the evasive attitude of other American writers towards a subject like incest, Baldwin is committed to deal with the taboo provocatively and to expose its pervasiveness.

The quest for love in the form of homosexuality, another taboo subject is explored in Baldwin’s novels. Baldwin’s lawyer Theodre Kupferman, “I know of course, he was homosexual, refers to his homosexual connections even with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.. Another writer who knew I was representing him told me he was known as ‘Martin Luther Queen’” (Opcited.169). In all that Baldwin has written about homosexuality, there seems to be an implied plea without preaching, for the acceptance of homosexual persons by society. These
abnormal, unfortunate, individuals are human beings and should have their right
to live their lives on an equal footing with other members of society. Baldwin
attempts an artistic expression of this attitude by selecting homosexual characters
as being just as suitable for fictional treatment as any other human beings.

Baldwin grew up convinced that he was ugly and was forever defensive
about his appearance, eagerly seeking friendship at school and later sexual
relationship as if to show that he was wanted, that he couldn’t be that ugly if
people were attracted to him.

In Baldwin’s fiction, there are a number of characters who are unable to
establish relationships with their fathers, and who consequently reach out to
other males for the kind of masculine love they were denied as children. By
identifying themselves with strong men they assume vicariously the masculinity
they have missed in their family and social lives.

They become, momentarily at least, female in their quest for the
masculinity that would provide them with identity. This becomes especially clear
in the case of Baldwin, whose sexual and emotional development was dwarfed
by a wrathful father and an oppressive society. Evangelical Christianity provided
him with some sort of physical attraction; John in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*
apparently sins by trying to substitute Elisha for God. Homosexuality is the
medium through which he conveys his alienation from God and society.
Giovanni’s Room, deals broadly with the sociological interpretation of sexual deviation and its repercussions. The treatment of homosexuality in the novel, seems provocative because of its apparent difference between received social standards of conduct and morality regarding homosexuality. Baldwin’s stance is contradictory to commonly accepted norms in western society. His attitude towards homosexuality is unorthodox. The resolution of the plot of the novel itself contains Baldwin’s ideas of the nature and character of homosexuality. The murder responsible for sending Giovanni to the guillotine takes place because David has deserted him. He abandons him out of his preference for a heterosexual relationship. David is acutely aware of moral imperatives arising out of his sense of masculine identity. David’s commitment to Hella results in the abandonment of Giovanni.

For Baldwin homosexual love is the highest form of heresy he can conceive of. The body, the Bible tells us, is a temple consecrated to God. The body and worldly experience, properly understood, are instruments of grace. Giovanni knows this fact by intuition, but David learns it too late. The violation of innocence is not a vice, for it may lend meaning to one’s humanity. It is also religious paradox of good emanating from evil. But here innocence is discovered in the relationship of men who have not yet been hampered by the concept of love as being exclusively heterosexual. For Baldwin it is only in homosexual love that innocence is experienced afresh.
In *Another Country*, the homosexual relations may be thought of as an attempt to renounce the significance of engagement in sex, it occurs between blacks or between blacks and whites. For if homosexuality is seen as issuing partly as a result of a narcissistic desire to return to the self in search of sexual fulfillment, it is obvious that such a relationship is but a deliberate affirmation of the egocentric sexual principle. A much tougher and more successful book is *No Name in the Street*, in which self-experience is juxtaposed with racial and social themes. Baldwin’s self-exploration in this book is not to indulge in egocentricity but to explain the situations of other individuals, to provide a personal context for social analysis, and to add meaning to his historical judgements.

*No Name in the Street*, shifts back and forth between past, present, between personal experience, and public pronouncements. Here Baldwin is no longer urging his white readers to change their ways in order to avert the fire next time. No longer does he appeal to white liberals. There will be no moral appeals on his part to this country’s moral conscience. His mode is embittered, pessimistic, sad and somewhat tired. There is a terrible finality about his denunciations, dooming any hope of racial reconciliation in America.

Deeply affected by the assassination of Malcolm X, Baldwin had first planned to write a play based on the life of Malcolm X. He agreed to write a scenario for a Hollywood film on this subject, instead of a stage-play. Unable to adapt himself in southern California, and unable to compromise on the
collaborative nature of writing for the movies and the specific changes in his script proposed by the producers, which he believed would seriously distort his sense of the meaning of Malcolm’s life and death, he left Hollywood, and the film was never produced. Later Baldwin published the scenario as *One Day When I was Lost: A Scenario Based on Alex Haley’s ‘The Autobiography of Malcolm X’.*

In the book *Devil Finds Work* Baldwin took up the role of a film critic. His commitment was to preserve cultural values in films. Baldwin, in his childhood, found movie-going a means both of escaping from his stepfather’s assaults on his personality and of coping with them. In the first section, Baldwin relates the films he saw as a child to the issues of self and race, in the second section he analyses films dealing with race relations. He reveals the stereotypes, the unspoken assumptions, overt or covert racism, moral evasions, homosexuality and distortions of reality in films; in the third section, Baldwin offers an elaborate criticism of films like *Lady Sings the Blues* and *The Exorcist.* He viewed films as a vehicle of cultural expression and as an instrument of moral values rather than as mere artistic medium.

In all his writings Baldwin reveals himself to be an eloquent and passionately committed humanist. As a black writer he pleaded the cause of blacks, but at the same time as a man he devoted himself whole-heartedly to the cause of humanity. Baldwin startles one by his use of “We” because he speaks
not as a black but as an American: “Our dehumanization of the Negro then is indivisible from our dehumanization of ourselves, the loss of our own identity is the price we pay for our annulment of his.” (N.N.S._25). Baldwin’s power as a writer lies in his ability to blend deeply autobiographical with the political and social. He looked upon himself as the black Everyman. Hence his writing has a moral vigour. Baldwin declared: “I wanted to prevent myself from becoming merely a Negro: or, even, merely a Negro writer.” (N.K.M.N.17). He conceded a decisive role to race, religion and nationality, but he has proved in no small measure that such determinants are deadly traps if they are not transcended. He was ultimately not concerned about race or nation but about pain, commitment, about seeing and hearing, about honesty in relation to one’s past, one’s present and one’s future as a person and as a people.

For Baldwin writing was both an act of transcendence and love. It was an attempt to get the world’s attention and an attempt to be loved. He saw that prejudice and hatred are recipes for ruin and reduce men to the level of animals and committed himself to keep his own heart free of hatred and despair. He worked towards the fulfillment of his dream of the humanity marching forward to that brave, new world where love and justice reign eternal and human beings can be different yet truly free. To achieve this Baldwin prescribes: The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society
and try to change it and to fight it-at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. Societies change this way.

It is necessary to consider the significance of Baldwin’s writings beyond its value as sociological treatises. The bulk of the existing critical views is based on a social perspective and its attempt is to view Baldwin’s writings as a mean of justifying his role as the spokesman of the black Americans. No doubt his writings have tremendous impact on society. Equally important is his artistic achievements. An attempt to reveal Baldwin’s commitments to art in discharging his duties as an interpreter, revelator and inspirer is the next logical step.