Chapter I

Introduction

James Arthur Baldwin's (1924-1987) literary career spanned four decades. During this period he authored twenty two books. This prolific literary corpus includes six novels, two dramas, eight volumes of essays, one edition of short stories, two series of dialogues, a scenario, a children’s book, and a collection of poems. Besides this, he is also credited with innumerable short pieces -- articles, interviews, recordings and discussions. Although always lapped up by an appreciative mass audience, his literary corpus was, nevertheless, confronted by a mixed, at times contradictory, critical acclaim. His works have been alternately praised and denigrated by critics, both the black and the white alike. The cause of this critical diversity is very aptly diagnosed by Fred. L. Standley and Nancy V. Burt as:

[There echoes in prophetic tone and moral concern, in intense language and poignant sincerity, a passionate and perceptive exploration of a broad spectrum of themes: the indivisibility of the private life and the public life; the intertwining of power and love in the universal scheme of things and in the structure of society; the misplaced priority in the value systems of the United States; the historical significance and the potential explosiveness of the continuing racial crisis at home and in the third world; the essential need of the individual to develop sexual and psychological consciousness and identity; and the special respons...
onsibility of the artist to promote and contribute to the evolution of the individual and the society. Each of these thematic emphases is consistent with his perspective that only two options are open to all ‘writers, black or white -- to be immoral and uphold the status quo or to be moral and try to change the world.’

This wide range of themes has not only assured Baldwin a permanent place in the American literature but has also made him a highly relevant writer.

The contours of critical space engendered by Baldwin, over the years, have undergone numerous shifts of emphasis. During fifties it mainly appeared in the form of reviews and commentaries. These valorized him as a spokesman for his race. The focus was on the ‘content’ and not on the ‘form’ or literary artistry of the works. In the sixties these book-specific reviews became more extensive but rigorous. This period is marked by a discernible shift in critical emphasis, in that it gave due respect both to author’s role as a civil rights advocate and to his craftsmanship and artistic ends. The seventies “saw the prolongation of interest by the reviewers, an attenuation of interest in his participation in the civil rights movement, a definite enlargement in the consideration given to his literary and aesthetic accomplishments, and an overall estimation of his place as a contemporary man of letters.” Since the eighties, Baldwin criticism has stabilized giving more attention to his understanding of the human being in social, artistic, aesthetic, spiritual,
religious and cultural terms. A chronological, i.e., decade-wise, overview of the existing Baldwin criticism, thus becomes an appropriate method to bring out the changing views of critics not only on Baldwin's novels but also the changing status of Baldwin as a novelist. The survey, however, deals with book-length studies in a separate section, although following the same framework.

Critics such as Richard Barksdale and Granville Hicks have reviewed *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) as a religious rather than a protest novel concerned with ethical values and patterns of conduct. Barksdale reaches this conclusion because for him its plot "is not grounded on race relations nor the sociology of the Negro"—a judgement of the novel adhered to by numerous critics till now.

Leslie A. Fiedler contends that *Giovanni's Room* (1956) is Baldwin's attempt to be more than a Negro writer because the book deals neither with blacks nor black problems per se; rather it is a book about the loss of the last American innocence in Europe. Discussing *Giovanni's Room* and *Notes of a Native Son*, Norman Mailer "proclaimed in Advertisement for
In the sixties, Baldwin published two novels, *Another Country* (1962) and *Tell Me How Long The Train's Been Gone* (1968). The most significant event of Baldwin criticism in this decade has been the appearance of the first biographical book on him, *The Furious Passage of James Baldwin* (1966) by Fern Marja Eckman. In it, Eckman described Baldwin as the "dark man" who rubbed salt in the "wounds of the nation's conscience" [and had] "an accusing finger thrust in the face of white America." The book discusses Baldwin as a creative writer as well as a witness and participant in the civil rights movement. Based on Eckman's personal accounts and long, exhaustive taped interviews, this biography gives insights into Baldwin's life and his state of mind at specific periods of his life.

Baldwin's third novel *Another Country* (1962), has proved to be his most controversial novel. It was denigrated so much that Norman Podhoretz came out with an article, "In Defence of a Maltreated Best Seller" emphasising that the book was "a remorseless insistence on the cruel truth." Similarly, Eugenia Collier, though endorsing that the novel had something "offensive" for everyone, tried to see the conjunction between the novel's
brutality and violence and its tenderness as a “hurting compassion.” The critic stressed that the novel is not about race or sex but about the individual’s lonely and futile search for love. According to Granville Hicks, Another Country is “one of the most powerful novels of our time. The complexities of love have seldom been explored more subtly or at greater depth, and perhaps the power of hate has never been communicated with a more terrifying force.” C.B. Cox and A.R. Jones interpreted Another Country similarly. They saw it as an “intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal emotional experience amidst the brutality and indifference of New York.”

For Norman Mailer, Another Country, is a shocker, “an abominably written book” for the most part but still “a powerful book, . . . closest to the mood of New York in our time.”

Robert F. Sayre considers Go Tell It on the Mountain to be a “tactically political, a religious, a semiconscious discovery of how to out-maneuuvre the father within the father’s faith.” Sayre further contends with reference to Giovanni’s Room that “shame is usable, if it provokes honest self-consciousness; death is purifying to the living if the loss is honored in a new conscience.” Saunders Redding, however, feels Baldwin going into the “hearts and minds of his white characters” [but] “takes no such trouble with
his Negro characters. His examination of their inner lives is perfunctory in *Another Country*.

Fred L. Standley avers that Baldwin treats the impact on the individual of the conditions of urban life and society, “especially the impact upon those within the lower socio-economic stratum” in terms of the ‘crucial situations’ like birth and death; struggle for love and power; doubt, guilt and anxiety. Standley further adds that all these crucial situations are the hallmarks of his novels *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *Giovanni’s Room* and *Another Country* with particular emphasis on certain ‘crucial situations’. David Littlejohn in his critical survey of Negro writing interprets Baldwin’s novels in terms of “autobiography-as-exorcism.” He finds that the lives of characters in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* are “of necessity lies, and all release must come from sex, from religious ardor, or from blunt, simple violence—which three, as the novel proves, may all be much the same thing.” *Giovanni’s Room*, Littlejohn says, is “the most subtle novel of the homosexual world” but “the ‘truth’ seems too fictionalized.” It praises *Another Country* as a remarkably American book written in a “style of screaming, no-holds barred verbal violence.”

For Sydney Finkelstein, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* gives a psychological insight into the “stock of real and significant personages with
which American literature has enriched the knowledge of the land, its history and people."\(^{20}\) For him, *Another Country* is "a humanization of reality."\(^{21}\) The inclusiveness in the novel is realized "mainly through sexual attachments and antagonism that the novel works itself out."\(^{22}\) George E. Kent focuses on Baldwin’s moral vision that manifests itself through his preoccupation with the characters in the context of society and ethics where the individual achieves "a functional being"\(^{23}\) through love and sex, relying heavily upon blues, jazz, spirituals and modernistic fiction particularly that of Henry James. Charles Newman reads Baldwin’s novels as quest metaphors, primarily concerned with definition of identity of blacks and of whites which are realized by "exploiting social paradoxes."\(^{24}\)

Charlotte Alexander contends that Baldwin’s characters are always in search of love. The search for love means physical intimacy which leads to emotional fulfilment but brings the risk and the "stink"\(^{25}\) of reality to the individual and also means the loss of innocence. Alexander finds Baldwin’s male characters avoiding commitment and involvement in heterosexual relationships. Eldridge Cleaver talks of Baldwin only in terms of Baldwin’s own homosexuality. He puts this proclivity within the context of a "gruelling, agonizing, total hatred of the blacks particularly of himself" and a "shameful, fanatical, fawning . . . love of whites"\(^{26}\) uncharacteristic of a black. Cleaver
suggests that there is a wish in Baldwin to be white. It is related mysteriously to his own homosexuality. It also results in Baldwin's repudiation of Richard Wright, Norman Mailer, and also Rufus, the protagonist of *Another Country*. John Lash, improving upon Charlotte Alexander but taking an altogether different stance from Eldridge Cleaver, establishes that there is, in Baldwin's fiction, a value system dependent upon the modern cult of "phallicism", the fear and admiration and worship of the male sex organ. Baldwin, he asserts, replaces Christianity with this new-found religion of phallicism but ultimately is not sure of even this religion. Colin Maclnness finds James Baldwin's theme of "life-death-passion-honour-beauty-horror" most relevant, and says that the treatment Baldwin gives to it would make his works discussed even a century later. In the same vein, Robert Bone could declare that the "most important Negro writer to emerge during the last decade is, of course, James Baldwin. His publications... have had a stunning impact on our cultural life."

Thus, in the sixties, Baldwin and his works were discussed more in the form of review articles -- singly or in a cluster of two or three books. He came out to be a controversial figure but nonetheless was recognized as one of the major writers of America. Still, his biographical details kept
influencing the criticism on him and his status as spokesman of the blacks also influenced the critical opinion.

Baldwin criticism in the seventies was characterized by discussions of his place in American literature. Baldwin published the last two novels of his career in this decade — *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) and *Just Above My Head* (1979). Both these novels received mixed reactions like the previous novels, particularly those published in the sixties. John Aldridge considered *If Beale Street Could Talk* “pretentious and cloying with goodwill and loving kindness and humble fortitude and generalised honorableness, and, therefore, a fantasy in which black Harlem characters live in an urban ghetto that can only be regarded as ‘idyllic’. ” Joyce Carol Oates, on the contrary, found it “a quite moving and very traditional celebration of love” not only between a man and his woman but also among family members. The same was the case with *Just Above My Head* (1979). Darryl Pinckney condemned the novel saying that the novel repeated his earlier concerns. Because of its forced polemical tone, the novel, for the critic, was no more than “a conversion to simplicities that so fine a mind as Baldwin’s cannot embrace without great loss.” But Eleanor Traylor came up with a contrary analysis of the novel: *Just Above My Head is a gospel tale told in the blues mode . . . the tale begins with a death but celebrates a life . . . It is simultaneously a blues moan*
and a gospel shout." Marcus Klein interpreted James Baldwin’s first three novels in terms of “the invisibility of the negro,” alienation, moral authority, love and the rhetoric within a chain of ideas in a kind of progression inextricably and complexly related to the question of identity. Following a parallel scheme of parameters of isolation, awareness of the self and the other, inability to love, and the need to forge a link with the community, Richard H. Rupp concludes that there is a constant “search for celebration” in Baldwin’s novels from Go Tell It on the Mountain to Another Country. The characters are able to celebrate communally in Go Tell It on the Mountain but Baldwin could not find the required social context to give form and meaning to celebrate in the next two novels, he contends. Robert Scott analyses Another Country in terms of its rhetoric and the ‘Black Power’. He says that the novel “shows the honing of a special language and ideology from which the thrust for black power has developed.” The language, he says, projects the love and hate conflict explicitly where black and white identities clash with each other. The novel asserts that racism must be reversed if it is to be understood and the resolution can come through love though it decidedly will not be a simple one. Albert Gerard finds Go Tell It on the Mountain characterized by an inner integration of personality, of the transcendental experience of the
individual and of the community against the "theme of cultural contact, which was central to the work of Henry James."37 He further states that the novel can be taken as an introduction to the rest of Baldwin's work because in it Baldwin as well as his hero "accepts his negritude."38 Another Country "is the existential situation of the American Negro" but at the same time it delineates "the fundamental problem of the socially rejected individual's need to seek emotional relationship in order to live."39 The achievement of Another Country is that, "for the first time, the condition of the Negro appears clearly as a modality of the condition of man."40 Arthur P. Davis considers Baldwin "as a kind of measuring rod for the nation's social conscience."41 He finds Go Tell It on the Mountain his best novel for the truthful portrayal of the "root material"42 for the Negro writers. Davis considers Tell Me How Long The Train's Been Gone his weakest novel. Further, he finds that Giovanni's Room and Another Country make plea to look honestly at sexual matters and human failures and virtues in racial, class and sexual contexts.

Stephen B. Bennett and William W. Nichols interpret the acts of self-destruction of Richard in Go Tell It on the Mountain and of Rufus in Another Country as "final, desperate efforts to salvage dignity in the face of dehumanizing oppression."43 As such the omnipresence of violence in black
fiction seems to make it necessary to undertake a search for meaning in the act of violence itself which leads either to self-destruction or towards the creative violence. Roger Rosenblatt studies the inbuilt contradictions of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* in terms of the symbolism of names and Biblical references. In this light, the salvation of John and its denial to Gabriel is "paradoxical."\(^{44}\)

David Foster finds that Baldwin's vision diminishes in each successive novel. It depends on the degree of fusion Baldwin achieves of the traditional motif and contemporary interpretation of "man's fall from innocence."\(^{45}\) The fusion is found complete in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and decreases with each successive novel till the publication of *Tell Me How Long The Train's Been Gone*, because the secular version of theme in *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country* could not be realized and was dropped altogether in *Tell Me How Long The Train's Been Gone*. Fred L. Standley asserts that *Another Country* "is a competent and compelling book--structurally, symbolically and thematically"\(^{46}\) and backs up this thesis with a detailed analysis of the novel. He contends that the principal norm of value is suggested by the reconciliation of Ida and Vivaldo, the Eric--Yves story being a reinforcing agent. He finds the key to the novel's theme to be the characters' urge to go "beyond the hate."\(^{47}\) In the same vein, John V.
Hagopian finds “Baldwin’s anguished quest for love and reconciliation with white Americans” supplemented and qualified by “more and more literary propaganda.”

George E. Bell evaluates *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni’s Room* in terms of the theme of possibility of love. Bell asserts that Baldwin in these novels does not show any dilemma in terms of love because “love is an attainable goal. Love is possible if one is willing to live existentially, if one is willing to abandon the puritan mythology of man’s corruption, of the body’s evil, of the necessity of sin and guilt, and to live freely, unashamedly, and unselfishly as a trusting and committed person.” But Addison Gayle Jr. takes the argument in another direction in relation to *Another Country*: “It is Baldwin’s most articulate plea for love and understanding from his fellow white Americans.” The novel is seen as an example of the reflection of the internalized stereotypes created by whites. Mark R. Daniels finds that estrangement in Baldwin is of universal nature and racial estrangement is only one facet of it. Baldwin’s comments, Daniels thinks, imply a re-ordering of the social order along a new morality which allows for individual differences and restores “man’s betrayal of his true nature.”
James R. Giles analysed *Go Tell It on the Mountain* in terms of the dehumanizing aspects of religion and homosexuality. He found that the sexual repression of the church and Gabriel’s denial of love to John is directly related to the young boy’s homosexual yearnings of Elisha. It is also his efforts to find “some other solutions than that offered either by the church or Gabriel.”

Jerry H. Bryant maintains that Baldwin became increasingly “racially aggressive” in essays and propagandistic in fiction under the influence of new critical criteria of the black revolution in the “hyperactive sixties.”

Arther P. Davis also finds Baldwin progressing into Blackness “by trying . . . to write a black novel” and his fiction is characterised by the dominant ideas of the period. Presence of jazz musician as protagonist, abused and mistreated white woman, black nationalist character, attack on middle class Negro are the elements common to the New Black Renaissance which are present in Baldwin’s *Another Country, Tell Me How Long The Train’s Been Gone* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*.

Debunking Baldwin on the ground of his writings becoming ‘black’ are critics like Ernest Breadford and Emmanuel S. Nelson who view the strength of Baldwin writings lying in the treatement of religious tradition of black Americans. Ernest Bradford examines *Go Tell It on the Mountain* in the religious tradition of black Americans -- a tradition which is predominantly
oral, where all the beliefs, practices, and teachings of the survival of African origin and western origin were kept alive and preserved and transmitted from one generation to the next. Bradford uses the references that the novel makes to the Old and the New Testaments to bring out its meaning. The most prominent aspect, Bradford says, is the moving of "the concept of 'liberation' from the purely physical to the spiritual and social levels."\textsuperscript{55} Emmanuel S. Nelson finds that Baldwin's work suggests that "one can achieve a genuine and liberating sense of self only through complete acceptance of one's self, through loving commitment to another, and through indentification with one's community."\textsuperscript{56}

Craig Werner added a new dimension in Baldwin criticism when he explored the economic aspect in his fiction, a dimension not dealt with in depth so far. Werner also notices a change in perception in Baldwin's career. Economic pressures play a vital part in shaping the character. Economic forces play their part on the individuals as well as on the race as a whole. \textit{Go Tell It on the Mountain} takes up the issue but does not resolve it in economic terms. "In economic terms, the theme of \textit{Giovanni's Room} centers on the characters' use of economic attitude to evade underlying spiritual difficulties."\textsuperscript{57} A turning point can be noticed in \textit{Another Country} where the central metaphor "is prostitution -- selling one's integrity for an economic
In *Tell Me How Long The Trains's Been Gone* is found a growing tendency to identify characters in terms of their social class rather than their individual peculiarities, which makes the economic standpoint clear suggesting the need for social action for the resolution of racial problem of America.

The critical survey of Baldwin’s works during the seventies, thus, foregrounds the salient issues of his literary vision: It led to the emergence of Baldwin as a writer within the African-American creative tradition. His identification with the ‘black’ clearly divided the critical opinion across the antagonistic lines. Critics like Davis, Oates, Ge’rard etc. endorsed his black vision and saw in his art a genuine voice of black struggle and aesthetics. On the other hand critics like John Aldridge, Jerry H. Bryant etc. castigated him for being propagandistic and hence making his art subservient to extra-artistic motives.

Ernest E. Champion finds Baldwin more relevant for the eighties for the simple reason that he demands “a new morality and a new conscience” from the Western world and the writers, besides exhorting conscious blacks and conscious whites to play their role dutifully in the attainment of this goal. In plain words, Baldwin’s creative role is deemed educative to the nation, and hence of contemporary relevance. Alfred Wang’s evaluation of Baldwin as an
essayist can safely be applied to Baldwin the novelist. Brushing aside Baldwin’s ‘blackness’ as strength or weakness, Wang finds him an “apocalyptic visionary with a tragic vision” who is “the unacknowledged moral legislator of the world” trying to save the fallen world, fighting for human freedom, dignity, and the sacredness of life with the weapon of love.

Amritjit Singh finds characters in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* struggling with/within middle class values to forge their identities, besides being beset with “the difficulty of shedding the fear and insecurity that leads to the adoption of one psychological prop or another, which, in turn, stands in the way of the individual’s self-realization.” Marlene Mosher finds the theme of survival in the face of tremendous odds persistent in Baldwin’s writing. Survival becomes possible when people learn to live blues because “only those who have suffered (and have overcome their torment) can understand the message of the blues.” This understanding brings transcendence from “trouble without ignoring it” and also means that they are not destroyed by it. It also implies that “only when one is honest about the particulars of his own experience can one become stronger because of those experiences; likewise, only when one recognizes the commonality of human suffering can one profit from the particular sorrow of others.”

Dorothy H. Lee analyses *Just Above My Head* in the light of Baldwin’s view
that "your suffering does not isolate you, your suffering is your bridge." Lee suggests that Baldwin brings all his themes together in this novel and concludes that suffering not only brings relief to the sufferer but also works for the good of the whole community. Michael F. Lynch presents an analysis of the theme of redemptive suffering in *Another Country* as it relates to the issues of art, self knowledge and love, and concludes that "Rufus's act of self-destruction and sacrifice becomes one of the seeds of the moral transformations of America" because it is in the light of his suffering that all the major characters come to perform a rigorous self-examination which leads them to difficulty but essential insights that, in turn, enable them to come to terms with their lives.

Emmanuel S. Nelson finds sexuality central to Baldwin's art and his life and states that his novels are "a testament to the growing maturity of his vision." Baldwin moves, he says, from the tentative sexual rebellion of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room* to polemic confrontation in *Another Country* and *Tell Me How Long The Train's Been Gone*, to a mature sexual self-acceptance in *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Just Above My Head*. The hypothesis is followed by a close analysis of the novels in the context of Baldwin's state of mind and American social scene in terms of homosexuality.
The core of Mike Thelwel’s detailed analysis of *Another Country* and its reviews is that the characters in the novel are seeking “not simply love, and an end to loneliness, but to ‘make it’. They are ‘seeking their public identity’ in the ‘anxiety-ridden, abrasive, neurotic, and merciless world of the artistic underground.’”68

John T. Shawcross gives a new direction to Baldwin criticism when he studies his first two novels from the angle of “narrative structure and form, allusion and association, mythic substruct, contrast and comparison, onomastics, flashback and framing,”69 because these elements contribute towards the meaning of these novels. He maintains that a true evaluation is possible only with the “eradication of critical prejudgement . . . as fictionalized biography of the black and the homosexual.”70 Shawcross’s idea is that *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni’s Room* point a way for moving to joy through sadness, by the acceptance of being within oneself --a form of transcendentence, where their “being alone is real.” David L. Dudley studies father-son relation in real life (metaphoric) and also their characters in fiction in relation to Wright and his predecessors; Baldwin and Wright; and Cleaver and Baldwin in a chain. The study makes it explicit that in order to gain a place of their own, the black artists under reference have to displace a father figure.71
During nineties, critics like Lynch, Rowden and Allen studied Baldwin from different angles ranging from mythological approach to biographical. Michael F. Lynch interprets *Go Tell It on the Mountain* from the point of view of the mythological subtext. Church and religion are found carrying negative emotions and peak religious moments containing coercion and/or insincerity. Basic mythological motifs used in the novel are snake symbolism and the hero’s journey as a quest for self-discovery. During this course, John is also searching for the father. His “heroism consists of his defiance of his father Gabriel and of Gabriel’s God and risking disintegration in the process.” \(^{72}\) This mythological subtext runs not opposed to religious faith but as a separate, parallel source of spiritual guidance.

Terry Rowden analyses *Another Country* in terms of Baldwin’s ambivalent attitude not only to the sexuality of the black man but to the very existence of black men in society. The character of Rufus is devoid of any black social context and his sexuality is realised in terms of a three point scale of white women, against the “psychological background of internalization of racial hatred.” \(^{73}\)

Brooke Allen,\(^{74}\) taking a cue from Toni Morrison’s edited volumes of Baldwin’s essays and fiction, discusses Baldwin the man occasionally drawing argument from his non-fiction. Allen finds Baldwin’s last three
novels written after 1963 worthless as propaganda writings. There is simply no discussion of his novels published after Another Country. From his earlier fiction, too, Allen could praise only Go Tell It on the Mountain.

Apart from these stray essays, there are only five book length studies devoted to Baldwin’s creative-critical corpus. Two of these, i.e., James Baldwin: A Critical Study and James Baldwin came out in 1970’s and the rest in 1980’s. In James Baldwin: A Critical Study, Stanley Macebuh traces a shift in Baldwin’s work from a homo thelogicus view that insists upon spiritual realities and apocryphal dreads to an overt concern with the “socio-political ambience of man’s life.” It constitutes his “blueprint for a new work.” Macebuh argues that this shift corresponded to a major shift in Baldwin’s perspective of life, i.e., from a private myth making to one in which public action had become all important. In her study of Baldwin, Louis H. Pratt delineates the broader concerns of Baldwin’s art, namely, “the universal concepts of freedom versus slavery, liberation versus oppression, reality versus illusion, identity versus darkness, confusion versus chaos.” Pratt also agrees with the recent trend in Baldwin criticism which stresses “the consummate artistic skill which transcends the social value of his artistry.”
For Carolyn Wedin Sylvander in *James Baldwin*, the vitality of Baldwin's creative credo/vision is embedded in and emanates from "his concept and use of history." He/his fiction is perceived as an articulate witness to a history which is a living entity, pluralistic and pulsating. Racism is an indispensable part of this plurality. The true identity of a person emerges when he immerses his being in this historical concreteness and experiences it in its complexities. Baldwin's fiction tends towards such integrative movements, where his protagonist not only becomes reflector of socio-cultural milieu, but also becomes a living manifestation of history.

Though Horace A. Porter's *Stealing the Fire: The Art and Protest of James Baldwin* appeared in 1989, it surprisingly fails to go beyond his second novel in its critical endeavour. It studies Baldwin's ambivalent attitude towards the African-American tradition of protest literature and how it influences his novels. It puts Baldwin in a comparative perspective vis-a-vis Richard Wright, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Henry James. Trudier Harris's *Women Characters In the Fiction of James Baldwin* extends the critical horizon on Baldwin by treating a neglected aspect of his fiction. Harris examines the roles women play and the significance of their characters for Baldwin as a writer. She notices a progression in Baldwin's portrayal of women characters. In the beginning the women characters are drawn from
the church and they are conceptually limited viewing themselves as wives, mothers, sisters and lovers. They always feel guilty if they fail to fulfil any of these roles. But they attain greater freedom and complexity of personality in his later works. Still they remain lower in position in Baldwin's fiction, seldom comparable to the prominent male figures.

The critical overview of Baldwin's critical space since 1980's foregrounds new issues. Although the majority of the critics still approach his fiction as a manifestation of the quest for identity, yet the analysis of this voyage departs radically from the earlier studies in the sense that it is now treated in a more nuanced and inclusive manner. If Champion and Wang see this identity quest in terms of 'moral re-orientation' that transcends racial consciousness, Amritjit Singh grounds it within blacks' struggle to forge a balance between their middle class status and their self-realization by adopting various socio-psychological props. Nelson, on the other hand, sees Baldwin's protagonists striving towards self-identity in terms of sexuality. And this quest in Thelwel shifts from personal identity to social identity.

Another group comprising critics like Dorothy H. Lee, Mosher and Lynch interpret Baldwin's protagonists' quest for survival and suffering. In
fact, for them, Baldwin fiction becomes an artistic expression of achieving wholeness through the imaginative probing of this suffering. Mychel F. Lynch takes the interpretation of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* in the area of mythical quest.

Shawcross approaches Baldwin's fiction in the spirit of new criticism. Although these interpretations lead to a more sophisticated appreciation of Baldwin as a fictionalist, yet limited as they are by the very nature of their genre, they fail to integrate these refreshingly provocative insights into a comprehensive study that could encompass all works of Baldwin in a holistic critical framework.

Another conspicuous feature of these critical endeavours is that it sees Baldwin's fiction endowed with a lopsided vision. Some of them, e.g., Terry Rowden debunk him for not creating black characters in proper racial context while the others debunk him for being excessively obsessed with the blackness. Both of these positions point an accusing finger at his artistic integrity and fidelity.

One more interesting feature that emerges from a look at the critical studies discussed above is that Baldwin has—either been lavishly praised or severely lambasted. Sexuality, race, religion, love, politics, existential problems, alienation and estrangement, urban experience, economic
conditions and poverty, crisis of identity, loss of dignity, relation of the individual and society and spiritual interpretation of American culture are the major areas taken up in wide ranging critical studies. Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, has been universally acclaimed to be his best novel and has been praised on all accounts — structure, themes and language. *Giovanni's Room* is generally praised for its 'bold' theme of homosexuality. *Another Country* has been a troublesome novel for the critics and as to its worth, their opinion is divided. The novel has been praised for the truthful depiction of the multiplicity of the inter-racial, inter-sexual and inter-social relations and the atmosphere of New York. At the same time it has been denigrated for structural flaws, weak characterization, repetitive and redundant language, and the lack of proper social context. Since *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* and *If Beale Street Could Talk* have been taken up only occasionally, there is less controversy about these novels on the one hand and a lack of detailed explication on the other. The reviewers' overall appraisal, wherever available, of *Tell Me How Long The Train's Been Gone* and *If Beale Street Could Talk* has been that though Baldwin's basic concerns continue to be the same as in his previous fiction, but his tone now is more militant and his delineation more polemic. Even when these novels are part of major studies, this fact has overshadowed other aspects of these
Just Above My Head, the longest and the last of Baldwin’s novels, has suffered a similar fate. But the critical opinion like that of Louis Hill Pratt has recognised it to be the novel where he has ‘come full circle’, a phrase Baldwin used for the novel himself.

The foregoing survey gives an ample idea of the gaps that exist in critical appreciation of Baldwin as novelist. The critical essays, though, important in themselves for bringing new insights to our understanding of Baldwin, nevertheless prove to be stray comments foregrounding certain aspects of Baldwin’s merits at the cost of others and thus fail to cohere into a holistic vision. The result is a critical lopsidedness. For example, various critics have studied Baldwin from the point of view of quest motif; yet the paradigms they choose are limited and at best could be applied to one or two novels only. This partly accounts for an oft-repeated study of a few novels only. Although Go Tell It on the Mountain, Giovanni’s Room and Another Country attract the repeated critical focus, others like Tell Me How Long The Train’s Been Gone, If Beale Street Could Talk, and Just Above My Head are almost marginalized critically. Consequently, there is a serious lack of comprehensive understanding of the writer that takes into account all the works. Even the book length studies are hampered by the selective reading of Baldwin. Even otherwise, the critical opinion is sharply divided along black
and non-black rhetorical polarity. This critical extremism, though provocative and intellectually stimulating invariably leads to simplification of Baldwin's thematic and aesthetic concerns.

The present study is a modest attempt at extending the analytic frontier of Baldwin criticism by evolving a framework that, while taking cognisance of the extant criticism and its gaps, can be meaningfully applied to the complete range of his fiction so as to bring out the core of his artistic oeuvre. The concept of 'code' as it is envisaged and applied to the novels under study tends to be a meaningful hypothetical modal to enter and unravel various trends of Baldwin's fiction. It not only helps understand his progression as an artist but also provides an inclusive framework to approach his fiction as a whole.

Generally speaking the term 'code' refers to "a system or collection of rules or regulations on any subject" or a complex of established principles/standards -- moral, ethical or aesthetic -- providing a normative framework/reference point to a particular system. In other words 'code' emerges as a meaning endowing entity. However, the code that gives direction and pattern to a system through individuals is itself perceptibly
changed/modified by the dynamics of the system. The ‘system’ and the ‘code’ then are held together in an interactive relationship.

This ‘denotative’ concept of code when applied to Baldiwn’s fiction, becomes a significant interpretive and integrative tool to unravel the contours of his vision and thematic concerns. Baldwinian narratives are creative explorations of the socio-cultural complex that is America. This complex is invested with a wide spectrum of a possible/probable inter-relational -- inter-personal, inter-communal, inter-social -- configurations. His protagonists strive towards a meaning in life against the backdrop of this human complex of collisions and collusions. And it is the ‘code’ -- personal, communal, idealistic, pragmatic -- that helps them ‘pattern’ or cope with life. The ‘code’ is in itself a product of the lived experiences, collective wisdom and cultural conventions. It is channelized through culturally received ideas and emotions that come into play when individuals respond to each other, or to the external milieu around them. In Baldwin’s fiction this code mainly manifests itself through love. Further, this critical perspective tends towards an evolutionary understanding of the author’s credo.

The significance of love, the all encompassing core of Baldwin’s ‘code’ finds unanimous critical focus. In fact “[l]ove is at the heart of the Baldwin philosophy.”81 Baldwin himself has very candidly stated: “...
realized . . . that love . . . was among my possibilities. Not merely the key to my life, but to life itself . . . . It began to pry open for me the trap of color.”

Baldwin’s idea of love is very comprehensive since it is “a state of being, or a state of grace . . . quest and daring and growth” and it is “for this reason that love is so desperately sought and so cunningly avoided. Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live within.” But love does not come to a person easily. One has to pay the price for it and the price is the readiness to be loved by other person and to change that person and be changed by that person. It is not and cannot be a casual relation. It requires commitment and involvement on the part of the individuals:

If you love anybody, you honor at least two necessities at once. One of them is to recognize something very dangerous, or very difficult. Many people can’t recognize it at all, that you may also be loved; love is like a mirror. In any case, if you do love somebody, you honor the necessity endlessly, and being at the mercy of that love, you try to correct that person whom you love. Now that’s a two way street. You’ve also got to be corrected.

Baldwin broadens the scope of this concept of love in the comments he made to a question whether his message was based on the New Testament Commandment of loving one’s neighbour as oneself: “If you really love one person, you will love all people.” A significant point to be noted here is that for Baldwin the prevalence of sex in his fiction does not undermine the importance of love:
I don’t think people go around looking for sexual fulfilment. They go around looking for love. I don’t think they can have anything resembling sexual fulfilment unless they do love. 

This comprehensive idea of love also encompasses the realization of true self of the individual which may entail pain and suffering to be borne gracefully. It becomes a ‘liberating’ experience because all the culturally received notions of race, sex and ethics might have to be dispensed with. Both these aspects arecomplexly intertwined with each other -- one thrives on the other or throttles the other.

Sex, invariably the manifestation of love, “essentially reveals who one is and has been, what one has lost or found, what one is willing to know, whether with cruelty or grace.” Sex has been used in Baldwin’s novels as a grand passion reflecting all emotions like hate, anger, rape, violence, loneliness, frustration, love and caring. It is purgative, redemptive and enhances bonding even as personal, physical emotional act. But most importantly, sex has been used as expressing the individuals’ true self during the sex-act giving a peep in the personality of the character. Prevalence of sex in Baldwin’s novels should be seen in the light of his comments: “In most of the novels written by Negroes until today, there is a great space where sex ought to be; and what usually fills this space is violence.”
Race, sex, morality, religion, politics, economy and gender forming the social context of Baldwin’s fiction act as spurs for his radical concerns because the human psyche retains its richness and is not made subservient to the social fabric though it may influence him greatly: “The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended.” He recognizes in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) that people are trapped in history and history is trapped in them because:

> History was someone you touched... It’s all around you. It’s in the music; it’s in the way you take it; it’s in the way you cry; it’s in the way you make love. When I realized that something had brought me from birth to maturity—something had created me, and it wasn’t anything I had been taught in school; it wasn’t any history which had been, in a sense, handed down to me, invested in me, and when I say me I mean all black kids.

Hence love as a complex and comprehensive idea forms the core of the ‘code’ and the principles associated with it—awareness of one’s self, commitment and involvement in love relations, capability to bear pain and suffering, realization of the futility of social categorizations and the capability to overcome these barriers, a sense of present and past—enable Baldwin to act out the relationship between the individual and the community.
James Baldwin’s fiction, taken as a whole, can be interpreted as a metaphor of American culture. In this sense *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni’s Room* may be treated as problematization of race, sex, religion, morality and history within the restricted social contexts relating to the concept of ‘code’. *Another Country* not only adds the dimension of the complexities of race and sexuality to it but also suggests to take a plank for the possibility and functionality of this ‘code’. *Tell Me How Long The Train’s Been Gone* as an extended analysis of the functionality of the ‘code’ suggests the viability on an individual level, albiet with a heavy price to be paid by that individual. *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Just Above My Head* form that part of the metaphor which suggests that resolutions of all the paradoxes of the black community have to be attained before it could become a part of American culture at par with white community. Since the resolution of the problems and paradoxes of individuals leads to a viable love-relationship, howsoever precarious, in a heterogenous American Society, it may imply that resolution of the black community (without making it a pale copy of the white community) may lead to a workable love relation, an idea not dissimilar to what he says in *The Fire Next Time* (1963) : “The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love.”91 He
believes that black people, coming from "sturdy peasant stock," made America a great country economically with "an unassailable and monumental dignity" and have survived against the odds of racism.

Besides making a survey of the available Baldwin criticism and bringing out its salient features, in the first chapter, the concept of 'code' as it obtains in the novels of James Baldwin is also evolved. Various aspects that make up Baldwin's 'code' have been put together.

*Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room* are analyzed in the second chapter from the perspective of the 'code' discussed above. Both these novels have a limited range of social context -- The action in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* takes place in Harlem and all the characters are black with an overall atmosphere of religion. The action of *Giovanni's Room* takes place in France, largely in Paris and the principal character David (White) is involved in homosexual and heterosexual relations with other white characters and the overall atmosphere is that of homosexuality. James Baldwin, in these two novels problematizes religion and accepts moral standards as they relate to the possibility of love which is the nucleus of the 'code'. Both these novels are discussed together because they are related to two significant dimensions of society, i.e. religion and morality.
Another Country and Tell Me How Long The Train's Been Gone are analysed in the third chapter. Heterogeniety of race and sexuality is the basis of putting both theses novels together. Another Country puts forward a symbolic conclusion that individuals can establish a functional and viable love relation if they are capable of transcending the barriers of race, sexuality and the psychological problems of modern life. In Tell Me How Long The Train's Been Gone these issue are acted out over a period of time. The novel suggests that attainment of the ideal of love -- (with all the conditions discussed earlier as part of the 'code') -- is possible only on the level of an individual in a racially heterogeneous American society.

The fourth chapter is devoted to the analysis of If Beale Street Could Talk and Just Above My Head. Both these novels deal exclusively with black characters but the social background of the novels is different. If Beale Street Could Talk focuses on the love relations of a heterosexual black couple against the background of racist American culture. This social fact of racism remains subdued and is never brought to the foreground. The family, in this novel, is an idealized one and all the members devote themselves to help this couple come out of the problem. Love which leads to procreation is the bond between the individuals and the community and it also suggests optimism in the novel. Just Above My Head has the civil rights movement of 1950's and
1960’s as the background against which the personal and private experiences of the characters are acted out. The cast, again, is all black. The main focus of the novel is towards the resolution of the characters’ dilemmas, predominantly of love and sex. Procreation symbolically present in *Tell Me How Long The Train’s Been Gone* and physically present in *If Beale Street Could Talk* has been given a new meaning through the character of Julia and the idea of history as a realization of present, past and future has been acted out in the case of Arthur Montana, the protagonist of the novel. The possibilities and failures of love are the dramatic center of the novel. ‘Your suffering is your bridge’ is true of this novel more than any other novel. The discovery and experience of love is liberating. It is the same between man and woman, between man and man, between brothers, actual or symbolic and is supremely so between the gay lovers. It, thus, though independent of the institution of marriage, gradually empowers a person to bear sorrow, pain, suffering and self-acceptance. Hall is enabled to come to terms with his own self and also to understand others especially Arthur when he relives the whole life. Love is more of a timeless and purgative experience than mere passion which makes life meaningful. *Just Above My Head* treats love and other concerns of Baldwin in a comprehensive and inclusive manner. The institution of Church is again found wanting in this novel. Both the novels
are black culture oriented and white America, wherever present is only an agent of violence in the background of the tale. Both these novels, on account of treatment given to the subject matter become related to the Afro-American tradition in a creative symbiotic manner. James Baldwin has 'come full circle' in this novel.

In the last chapter an effort is made to sum up the findings arising out of the detailed analysis of the novels.
NOTES


5 Norman Mailer, qtd. in *Critical Essays on James Baldwin*, p. 5.


7 ibid., p. 12.


17 ibid., p. 122.

18 ibid., p. 124.

19 ibid., p. 125.

21 ibid., p. 280.

22 ibid., p. 281.


38 ibid., p. 156.

39 ibid., p. 158.

40 ibid., p. 164.


42 ibid., p. 218.

Roger Rosenblatt, Black Fiction (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974).

David Foster, "'Cause my house fell down’: The Theme of the Fall in Baldwin’s Novels,” Critique, 13, No. 2 (1971), 50.


ibid., p. 509.


58 ibid., p. 23.


63 ibid., p. 118.

64 ibid., p. 120.


70 ibid., p. 109.


85 David Leeming, p. 125.

86 Fern Marja Eckman, p. 136.


89 ibid., p. 33.


92 ibid., p. 21.