Chapter V

Conclusion

The preceding discussion was an attempt to analyse Baldwin’s code in its evolutionary manifestations. The underlying thrust of the thesis has been to unearth the ‘code’ which in its various dimensions is necessary to sustain the human relations within the context of religion, morality, heterogeneity of race and sexuality. In this process an attempt has been made to see how this ‘code’ gets forged and the difficulties that the protagonists face in imbibing and enacting it. The success or the failure of the protagonists in developing ‘connectedness’ with their surroundings, is intimately related to their success or failure of forging this ‘code’. The scope of the study is comprehensive in the sense that it takes up in its sweep all the novels written by James Baldwin. The study has tried to put the growth of Baldwin’s perspective in its chronological order.

The survey of Baldwin criticism not only enables us to understand the thrust of these critical endeavours but also enables us to understand the evolutionary contours of the criticism. So far the focus of the studies on Baldwin has been on tracing a relationship between his fiction and his life, on viewing it as protest literature, or on reading it as an expression echoing alienation, maladjustment, identity, sexuality and religious issues within racial
milieu. It also attempts to draw attention to the gaps in the critical tradition which are symptomatic of the critics’ narrow and hackneyed concerns, if not their casualness towards Baldwin, the artist.

Most of these studies being in the form of essays end up dealing with these issues in a perfunctory manner. In other words the analysis fails to transcend the delimiting generic enclosures. Though insightful in themselves, these essays at best remain lopsided critical endeavours. Another failure of this critical tradition is that it has repetitiously tended to concentrate, for its analysis of Baldwin’s credo, only on three of his novels, namely *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *Giovanni’s Room* and *Another Country*. This selective reading thus cannot do justice to the artist’s credo. Neither can it trace the progression of his vision in its entirety. It, thus, ends up essentialising Baldwin rather than historicising his vision. The present study has attempted to plug this serious loophole in Baldwin criticism by focusing on his hitherto neglected novels like *Tell Me How Long The Train’s Been Gone*, *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Just Above My Head*.

The study builds a critical framework which apart from plugging the gaps in Baldwin’s criticism, and bringing out its salient features, also becomes a comprehensive tool to analyse Baldwin’s fictional ouvre in its entirety. The concept of ‘code’ provides this critical framework. Here
'code' acts as a meaning bestowing entity that gives direction and pattern to an individual within a given system -- interpersonal, inter and intra-racial. The system and the 'code' are held together in a dialectical relationship. However, the 'code' in itself is a function of the lived experience, collective wisdom and cultural convention. In Baldwin's novels this 'code' manifests itself in various forms, love in its complexities being its most potent manifestation. The code of 'love' in Baldwin is invariably concretized in terms of sex -- hetero, homo or bisexual, separately or in varied combinations thereof.

This aspect, being a common theme running through his novels, thus becomes a meaningful, interpretive and integrative tool to approach and analyse his total fictional output. And this 'code', as it creatively unfolds in his works, by itself becomes a critical parameter to gauze his thematics progressively. The concept of 'code' as Baldwin envisions it (as is apparent from the preceding discussions) impinges on the issues of religion, morality and race, becomes an inclusive visionary ballast for meaningful identity and existence. The code of love is not a simplistic concept but it is a state of 'being', of 'grace', of 'daring', of 'growth' and of 'quest'. It requires commitment and involvement; the ability of a person to be changed and to change others, the awareness and realization of the true self, and a readiness
to bear the concomitant pain and suffering. The next three chapters of the study try to probe the working out of this code in the lives of the protagonists. The study also tests the variability of the 'code' against the backdrop of their changing contexts. With the novelist progressively grappling through various thematic concerns in his evolution as a novelist, his 'code' gets defined and enlarged.

The social context of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room* is homogeneous in the sense that whereas in the first novel, the problem of religion unfolds itself in the context of the blacks only, in the latter the questions of morality are probed in a all-white context only. Sexuality, an aspect of the 'code', is thus explored in comparatively monolithic contexts. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain* sexuality is probed from the standpoint of sin, guilt and terror in theological terms. In *Giovanni's Room*, it is probed with reference to morality that is rooted mainly in cultural conventions. In these novels Baldwin's concept of 'code' emerges in its rudimentary form. It is established through implication rather than through explication. The necessary pre-requisite through which love can attain the status of the 'code' are found lacking. The protagonists in these novels are unable to transcend their limitations predominantly created by religion and morality. The moral chaos inherent in their situation, which undermines their
potentiality, is the consequence of their refusal to come to terms with their sexual leanings. The burden of religion and the social morality is too much with them and tends to blur their capabilities to put their lives in true/proper perspectives and hence they fail to authenticate themselves. These novels thus form the first stage of the maturing of Baldwin's code because the resolutions remain tentative and symbolic.

In *Another Country* and *Tell Me How Long The Train's Been Gone*, exposition of the 'code' is made more complex and inclusive. Homogeneous context (black or white) gives place to a heterogeneous one (black and white). Apart from extending the homosexual dimensions of sex/love, these novels also foreground the heterosexual aspect of the 'code'. Both of these ideas are further complicated by grounding them within racial configuration. Like *Giovanni's Room*, the question of 'shame', continues to echo through the narrative of *Another Country*, but here the author has been able to resolve this problem in Eric's character. The way it is resolved reinforces the contours of Baldwin's 'code', i.e., the necessity of being truthful to one's own self and acknowledging one's realities. This confessional daring lends his personality 'grace'. The resolution, however, is not simplistic but takes due cognizance of the complexities of heterogeneous culture.
However the etching out of the ‘code’ within the enclosure of racial hatred leads to contrary results. This contrariness is an outcome of perceptual growth or lack of it. Rufus’s and Ida’s stories in their respective inter-racial and inter-relational sexual consummations -- the concrete manifestation of the code -- encapsulate and define these contraries. Rufus’s failure springs from the drying up of his traditional creative inspiration (music). Ida succeeds because unlike Rufus, she recognises the futility of sex as a weapon. This enables her to unclog her deliberate emotional and perceptual blockade to accept her hitherto deliberately suppressed self. Vivaldo’s story is a success because it finds affirmation through confession and a purgation through homosexual relation with Eric.

Leo and Barbara’s love in *Tell Me How Long The Train’s Been Gone* embodies and expands this affirmative potential present in Ida and Vivaldo. However, this affirmation, though arrived at through deliberate posturings, is kept short of translating it into the culturally acceptable institution of marriage. Procreation is only symbolically present in the novel, in the absence of marriage. Thus the ‘code’ becomes more enlarged by accommodating in itself the hitherto unexplored dimensions of human experience. The notion of love is re-defined in Leo and Barbara relationship.
If Beale Street Could Talk and Just Above My Head, are more in the nature of the recapitulations of the thematic concerns of Baldwin. In these novels Baldwin seems to reach a final stage of his exploratory trajectory. The concept of love, the main prop of his credo, in If Beal Street Could Talk is established in a manner that not only brings out its procreative possibilities but also turns it into an integrative symbiotic means whereby the individual and the community enter into a mutually sustaining communication. The potentials of community get activated in this novel with a view to affirm the individuality and action of Fonny and Tish. Sex attains the height of sacrament.

Finally, Just Above My head probes and propounds, the question of the individual’s acceptability, as he/she actually is, within the existing conventions of family and community. The question of integration here, unlike Baldwin’s other novels, does not unfold on the individual plane alone, but incorporates and analyses its familial and societal dynamics too. The study thus makes manifest the evolving dynamics of Baldwin’s ‘code’ within his creative ambit of the possible and the probable, underlining the relational matrices of his novels. Love, especially in its concrete physical manifestations, becomes a crucible holding the individual and the society in all their complexities. The way the characters respond to the physical
manifestation of love, and emotional or moral reverberations created by it, ultimately equips them to confront or evade life. Sex as touchstone tests the limitations and strengths of the individual and the society. The sexual mores have to be confronted and reorganised, as society needs be radically reoriented to purge it of hypocrisy at the level of praxis. Hence the primacy of sex as a means for social re-organisation in Baldwin.