Chapter one

Creative Dramatists

Race still remains a significant factor in defining human relationship in the world. Racism is a man made, man enforced phenomenon. It has existed right from the beginning of human existence. Man being a social animal, his happiness depends upon the nature of his relationship with his society.

Racism as a distinct phenomenon of the American social and political scene was clearly rooted in that period of history, wherein the first Africans were brought as cheap labour onto the American work force. White Americans saw these people as property, as machinery that could do inordinate amount of work without demur. Joel Kovel in his critically penetrating analysis of racism says that the white master,

…first reduced the human self of his black slave to a body and then reduced the body to a thing; he dehumanized his slave, made him quantifiable and thereby absorbed him into a rising world market of productive exchange…Thus in the new culture of the west, the black human was reduced to a black thing, virtually the same in certain key respects as the rest of non-human nature-all of which could become property. This reduction of human to non-human was the first definite step towards the establishment of racism as an innate archetype of white American civilization. (Kovel, White Racism 18)
Arriving in America in chains black Americans were systematically and legally robbed of their humanity. They were forced to work from sunrise to sunset on the southern plantations entirely for the profit of others. White color had to be and should be, the only criterion for survival, success and happy coexistence in America. Being white implied a whole series of connotations, of being attractive both physically and culturally, desirable, intelligent, reasonable and above all worthy of love. Blackness was seen as a negative sign, a symbol of ugliness, uncontrolled irrational behaviour, violent sexuality and so on. W.E.B. DuBois, a black sociologist, portrayed the hypocrisy, hostility and brutality of White Americans towards black Americans through his works. He summarizes the existential dilemma of blacks in the following way.

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world…a world which yields him no true self consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. [DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk 16,17]
Having allotted such a burden of evil, fear and diabolism to the black color, western philosophy, society and culture finally found the perfect personification of this misalliance in the black man. The devil was an abstract entity in the western thought until the western man encountered the black man from Africa. The triangle drawn between devil, black color and black man became firmly entrenched in the psyche of White America. Within this atmosphere of anger, hate and fear with its background of blackness, began the extra ordinary enactment of a tragedy where in the blackman was the principal villain. This situation of blackman cannot be treated as an isolated problem of black man alone. It is intertwined with the greater problems of American civilization and democracy and it reflects the general American anxiety over identity. The American lower and middle class men have been affected by this rootlessness and they were incapable of having a firm grip on what goes on in the world around them. The Depression, the World Wars and the ideological and political conflicts among the Black masses and leaders often, hindered the development of a proper consciousness among the Black people. Booker T Washington, one of the strongest and most influential leaders among the black Americans aptly describes the Negro community as a basket of crabs, where in should one attempt to climb out, the others immediately pull him back. The fate of the Negro is linked with the fate of the American. Neither could he know himself without acknowledging the other. America does not comprise of a homogeneous population which is either all white or white oriented. The definition of an American has traditionally been dominated by the white
superiority myth and the recognition of black deficiency. The relationship between the whites and the blacks in the USA is not really a satisfactory one because the black look upon the white as the oppressors, while the white treat the black as their inferiors and treat them almost contemptuously in actual practice, while in theory acknowledging them as American citizens having the same rights as they themselves enjoy. The Negroe’s obsession with identity has emerged as a result of his peculiar experience in America.

Slavery was for a long time an established and well-entrenched institution in America, and it was more wide spread and more deeply rooted in the Southern States than in the Northern States of the country. It took a prolonged Civil War in the country to bring about the abolition of this institution there. Abraham Lincoln, the President of the U.S.A., led a crusade against slavery and as the Southern States refused to agree to the abolition of slavery, Abraham Lincoln declared a war against those states, ultimately winning the war and then proclaiming the abolition of slavery. Slavery in America came to an end in 1865.

Negroes were formally and officially liberated from slavery. But the whites continued to look upon the Negroes with contempt and the Negroes continued to suffer the agony of the humiliations to which they were subjected by the whites. A number of associations and societies kept trying all the time to bring about a mutual understanding between the two races. Even today Negroes suffer from many disabilities in America although legally and constitutionally they are recognized as American citizens entitled to all rights which whites
enjoy. Majority of the Negroes live in degrading conditions and their social status is much lower than the whites.

After the bitter turmoil of the civil war, during which blacks were emancipated there was some improvement in the conditions of their lives. The first world war brought on chaotic days all over the world and it affected black Americans too. The crucial period after the war, coupled with the Great Depression, brought on further tribulations to the blacks of America, upsetting the institutions of family and society. Many black man could not find jobs and racial discrimination was at its apex. An existential anxiety and alienation from society and from himself, a feeling of nobodyness, struggle for survival and loss of identity are clearly evident in the life of Black Americans. In search of better employment opportunities the black masses migrated to the North. It also reflected the fact of intensifying struggle by black people for democracy. Lincoln issued the famous emancipation proclamation on 1-January 1863. But all the Negro slaves were not officially freed until 1865. To get full citizenship rights Negroes had to wait till the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendment. The right to vote was granted by the 15th Amendment in 1870. To deprive the Negroes of their voting rights, some states established certain voting requirements. Economic pressures, cruelty, torture, lynchings were also introduced to prevent Negroes from voting. Black American’s attempt at integration led to a breakdown of his native values, such as self respect, self-love, dignity and pride in one’s own race. This extremely subtle, but very corrosive facet of
racism had its birth in American history and its maturity in modern American thought. Kovel states,

…throughout history, whites have created the institutions by which black people are forced to live, and which force them to live in a certain way, almost invariably so as to foster…constellation of unworthy traits. From slavery itself to modern welfare systems, this has been the enduring pattern… [Kovel, 195]

Booker T. Washington became perhaps the most prominent African American leader of his time. Born into slavery he moved with his family to West Virginia after emancipation. He devoted his life for the upliftment of his race. He believed that African Americans could gain equality in U.S by improving their economic situation through education rather than by demanding equal rights. Dr. W.E.B DuBois, one of the greatest sociologists, decided to use his intellect to prove the equality of the black man. His identity as a black man propelled him into public life and politics. Despite opposition from Booker T Washington, DuBois organized the Niagara Movement, the first black protest organization of the twentieth century. Five years later it evolved into the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People. The Black Nationalism of Marcus Garvey, the Marxism of Claude Mc Key, and the Pan-African Movement came into being for the elimination of discrimination and for all civil rights and education.
The experience of the Negroes during the world wars proved the fact that the Negro could not enjoy full citizenship rights even in Armed Forces. The segregation in Armed Forces came to an end in 1945. Hope gave way for frustration and desperation characterized the mood of blacks. More than ever they embraced revolution and direct action. World wars exploded many racial myths and emboldened many to question and disobey the nonsensical barrier imposed by whites. The Supreme Court Desegregation Decision of 1954 and the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1956 which ushered in the leadership of Dr. King openly proclaimed the Black Americans discontent with the status quo and his determination to fight against discrimination and segregation.

A better climate began to emerge in the post war years due to several factors. America being the most important member of the United Nations and the leader of world affairs, could not speak about the denial of human rights in other countries while the same was going on there. So they have begun to appoint Negroes to important responsible positions in the government. Many Negroes feel that though their objective position in American life is improving, it is negligible when compared with that of the whites. Their dissatisfaction is the chief motivation behind the Negro protest movements. The protest movements which began as upper class later spread to the Negro masses. There are both integrationists and separatists within the Negro community itself. Among those who favour integration, there are those who want complete cultural assimilation with white society as some others who believe in maintaining separate but co-operative strands of white and Negro
culture, each enriching the American culture. The result of the oppression and segregation of the Negro was the development of a distinct culture and folk values as seen in their life style, religion, literature, folklore and music. This Negro sub culture contains some elements of intrinsic values, and some which are destructive to the people in it. The suppressed people in search of recognition, develops a group consciousness and along with that a body of attitudes, sentiments and beliefs which serve to unify its members. Their isolation from the larger society breeds common interests and group pride which integrate the individuals of the group. So black people struggled to define themselves with respect to their newly acquired freedom. Emancipation relaxed the socialized system of white controlled black bodies, providing blacks with space to play other societical roles. But Negro is American not African. His ideals, feelings, values and articulation are products of the American culture, modified by transmission of it through himself. He is no longer the pure seventeenth or eighteenth century African brought to American shores. It is therefore no idle claim that his twentieth-century cultural identity has been derived from many sources. The most basic of these is the common human heritage, the second his African cultural inheritance, the third the western modifications it has undergone, and the fourth his Afro American experience. American Negro culture is not something independent of general American culture. It is a distorted development. American racism provided a basis for a separate and distinctive black American culture. W.E.B DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folks* expressed the tension created by these two extremes
as an American, and as a Negroe a “double consciousness” within the black man. A divided self… and no clear indication which is better and truer self. [DuBois, The Souls 17]

The Afro–American woman bore a double edged persecution; one as a worker, both in the house as well as in the fields and, as an object of sexual exploitation. They were deprived of every basic human right. She was seen as an over sexed, immoral, loose woman. She was thrust under a capitalist society which saw her as an inexpensive commodity and therefore utilized her to the utmost without any sense of guilt. In no area of life have they ever been permitted to attain higher levels of status than white women. Additionally, ever since slavery, they have been sexually exploited by white men through rape or enforced sexual services. This sexual exploitation of Negro women by their white masters led to the birth of a new racial type of blacks called mulattos whose sole responsibility was on the shoulder of their mothers. The black man was degraded by being deprived of power and right to protect his woman from white man. The black woman was directly degraded by the sexual attack, more profoundly by being deprived of a strong black man on whom she could rely for protection.

The question of black ‘matriarchy’ is commonly misunderstood. The very term “matriarchy” implies the exercise of power by women, and black women have been the most powerless group in the entire society. They had the lowest status in society. Black woman’s wages, even today are lowest of all groups. Because of the lowest status, lowest paid jobs in white society are
reserved for black women. Black women from childhood are trained to become workers and are expected to be financially self supporting for most of their lives. They know they have to work, whether they are married or single. After the Civil War the high rate of unemployment among black males contributed to a great over all poverty in black families. Black woman took on the role of the bread winner. Their aim throughout her history in America has been the survival of her family and race. They have shown the pride and strength of people who have endured and survived oppression. This dual and often conflicting role has imposed great tensions on black women and has given them unusual strength.

Black men took this as a personal insult when women played a more primary role in the maintenance of their families and so many left the families in search for adventure and work. The responsibility of house and children fell completely on the woman. So in important matters her decision was final. The black mother is described as “the strong, Black bridge that we all crossed on, a figure of courage, strength, endurance unmatched in the annals of world history” [Barbara, Black Feminist Criticism 131]. For a girl child mother became the role model and she was capable of attaining self sufficiency. Boys do not get model father figure and that reflected in the development of personality and marital adjustments. Divorce, illegitimacy and desertion were common among the Negro low classes.

Black man’s world is a sphere of religious and racial consciousness. Religion dominated their life and on sundays Negroes assembled together in
the church DuBois calls religion “a real conserver of morals, a strengthener of family life, and final authority on what is good and right” [DuBois, “Of the Faith” 147]. In the face of adversity church provided them with hope and a sense of community because Negro church filled the gap in the sociological and psychological life of blacks. Men and women can come together, console each other and make each other glad. Black music is the energy of black spirit. It has served as an ecstasy, inducer, an escape a manifestation and affirmation of Blackness. The songs they sang in churches formed an important part of their cultural heritage.

In the Negroes long struggle for survival, education was always a foremost goal, both as a tool for advancement and acceptance in general society and as a means of uplifting and improving life in the black community. Missionary groups and American colonization society engaged in efforts to educate slave children. In the North such work continued after the abolition of slavery. But in the antebellum South it was a violation of law to teach the black to read or write. So the Negro community gave much importance to oral or story-telling tradition. The myths, legends and folktales supplied the knowledge, values attitudes of their fathers to the next generation. It also provided them with a psychological release from the oppression of the society.

Negro folk songs and music were also a part of the Negro subculture. They reflected the emotional experience of the slaves, their joys and sorrows. Even in slavery they were able to amuse themselves and their masters by singing and dancing, playing on crudely constructed musical instruments, and
engaging in playful banter and mimicry. The slave performers were frequently used to entertain visitors to the plantations and that the best of these performance were often brought by their masters to neighboring town or even hired out to other plantation owners to perform at parties, weddings and the like. This sad plight of the blacks was recorded by Paul Lawrence Dunbar, better known as America’s first major black poet, in the following way.

We smile, but o great Christ our cries
To thee from the tortured souls arise
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile,
But let the world dream otherwise
We wear the mask!

[Dunbar, The Complete Poems, 191]

Black theatre as an institution had a significant impact on black liberation and for the expression of black identity. Theatre is a public art. It is a shared experience and a social experience. It has a power to reinforce or challenge values. Like other institutions, it was an expression of society. Black experience proved a fruitful area for white authors. So the first black theatre in America was launched by a white man. On Broadway in the twenties most successful plays about Negro life were by white playwrights. It was effort of playwrights like Edward Sheldon, Ridgely Torrence, Eugene O’Neill, Paul Green, David Belasco, DuBose, Dorothy Heyward, Lew Leslie and Marcus Cook Connelly that enabled Black experience to come before the public as
serious dramas. Edward Sheldons *Nigger* (1909), Ridgely Torrance’s, *Three Plays of Negro Theatre* (1917), Three plays by Eugene O’Neil *The Dreamy Kid* (1919) *The Emperor Jones* (1920) and *All Gods Chillun Got Wings* (1922), Paul Greens *In Abraham’s Bosom* (1926), DuBois and Dorothy Heywards *Porgy* (1927) and Marc Connelly’s *The Green Pastures* (1930) were some of the significant plays which treated blacks as the subject matter.

During the first two decades of the twentieth century musicals continued to be the major form of dramatic writing. The views white authors had about blacks stemmed from the early white Minstrelshows, dating back to early 1805, which provided the basis for the stereotypes imposed upon black people in America. The dominant image of the black character was that of singing, dancing, shiftless, oversexed and carefree individuals. White playwrights aim was to capitalize on the exotic and sentimental elements contained in black life. Goldfarb and Wilson best sum up the appearance of the Negro in the early American literature:

American playwrights were not slow to see the comic possibilities of ‘darkie’ servant, and they set about writing dialogue for character in a dialect thick with malapropisms… The writers gave the character a slow shuffle, made him stupid, and laughed at the ill-fitting livery they had clothed him in. As a final insult he was invariably played by white actors in black face. [Alvin, Living Theatre 427]
During the 1920’s, the black people felt that time had come for them to be responsible for the presentation of their own images. Since the white dominated American theatre did not welcome either black artists or audiences, leaders in the African community took it upon themselves to create necessary opportunities for black artists. One of the most dynamic and versatile leaders was W.E.B DuBois. He displayed a major interest in Negro drama. He was the editor of *The Crisis* magazine and for twenty years he used it as a platform to speak out against racial injustices in America. He established NAACP’s Drama Committee of Washington DC to encourage black playwrights to develop their craft by writing and producing their plays. He himself stated the intention of Drama committee in the following way:

> In art and literature we should try to loose the tremendous, emotional, wealth of the Negro and dramatic strength of his problem through writing, the stage pageantry and other forms of art. We should resurrect forgotten ancient Negro art and history and we should set the black man before the world as both a creative artist and strong subject for artistic treatment.

[DuBois, The Crisis IX 312]

DuBois felt the urgent need to promote good black dramatists writing about black experience. So *The Crisis* and *The Opportunity* magazines launched literary contest for black playwrights and offered cash prizes and publications for the best one act plays that dealt with black history or experience. DuBois also organized “The Krigwa player’s Little Negro Theatre’
to produce ‘a real Negro Theatre’ that would address itself to the black community. In the words of DuBois the theatre would be “About us, by us for us and near us” [Hatch and Hamalian, Lost Plays 447]. He initiated the Krigwa playwriting contest in 1925, which resulted in the publication of several prize winning short plays, the emergence of new black playwrights, both male and female. His Krigwa Little Theatre Movement resulted in a nation wide Black Theatre Movement. As a result of the support from the NAACP, between 1910 and 1930 Blacks owned and operated, approximately one hundred and fifty seven theatres.

The first ‘Renaissance’ of black writing came in the late twenties and early thirties of the twentieth century. It was called the ‘Harlem Renaissance’ or ‘New Negro Movement’ or ‘Black Renaissance: The writers of the Renaissance were concerned with numerous social and economic problems but they basically turned to the problems of blacks. Harlem Renaissance was so named because a greater number of black artists flocked into Harlem, making it the black cultural capital of the world. It was a period of unparalleled black theatrical and literary activity. Black Renaissance proved that an African American could explore his blackness, dramatise it and describe its roots and still remain safe within the frame work of American civilization. Black writers for the first time made Declaration of Independence from both a dictatorial white literary establishment and their own urge to whiteness. Carl Van Vechten in his novel Nigger Heaven defined Harlem by putting these words into his Negro hero’s mouth:
Nigger Heaven! That is what Harlem is. We sit in our places in the gallery of this New York theatre and watch the white world sitting down below in the goods seats in the orchestra. Occasionally they turn their face up towards us, their hard cruel faces, to laugh or sneer, but they never becken. It never seems to occur to them that Nigger Heaven is crowded that there is not another seat that something has to be done. It doesn’t seem to occur to them... either we sit above them that can swoop down from the Nigger Heaven and take their seats. No they have no fear of that! The Mecca of the Negro! My God. [Carl Van, Nigger Heaven 42].

The Harlem Renaissance created a passionate interest among black writers for Africa their ancestral home and for its culture. Writers and artists of this movement reflected a shared spirit of cultural tradition and experience in their works. It enabled black artists to publish their work. More than thirty black playwrights began their writing careers in the 1920’s the most significant of whom were Wills Richard son, Randolph Edmonths, Georgia Douglas, and John Mathews. Many of these playwrights were desperately in need of an audience. Among the cultural leaders who created opportunities for black theatre include Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory. As Professors at Howard University in Washington DC they established the Howard players and the Department of Dramatic Arts as a professional training ground for black Americans in the theatre. Discussions of black theatre in Harlem Renaissance
are often based on the different philosophies of black drama held by Lock and DuBois. Plays about black experience were called ‘Native dramas’. It emerged in Harlem during the early 1920’s as a part of the Little Negro Theatre Movement. Native dramas could be divided into distinct categories “race or propaganda plays” and ‘Folk plays’. Propaganda plays included those plays that dealt with the issue of social oppression as experienced by black people. They were written primarily to effect social change. ‘Folk plays’ sought to depict the black experience without focussing on the oppressive issues blacks faced daily and racial tensions. Therefore the main goal of the Folk play was to educate and entertain without offending audience. DuBois favoured Propaganda Plays, while Locke promoted ‘Folk plays’. Plays with historical themes and subjects, such as African heritage, slavery or heroic ancestors formed a third category of drama that served to inform audiences about traditions of black culture and to reinforce racial pride.

A number of black playwrights emerged during the 1930’s more than in any previous decade. J. Augustus Smith, Hall Johnson, Dennis Donoghue and Langston Hughes were significant among them. Langston Hughes play *Mulatto* was produced on Broadway at Vanderbilt Theatre in 1935, where, it established a record of 373 performers, the longest run on the Broadway up to that time for a black authored play. The other plays by Hughes include *Little Ham* (1935), *The Emperor of Haiti* (1935) and *Don’t You Want to Be Free* (1937). Theodore Ward’s *The Big White Fog* (1938). Helped to create a new awareness among people. The major influence on black playwriting during this time was the
establishment of WPA Federal Theatre as a part of the economic recovery Programme of Roosevelt’s New Deal. It’s first concern was to fight discrimination at all levels in the theatre and on the society at large. Almost every serious play by black dramatist contained some awareness of injustice, some degree of anger, and some inherent forms of protest, direct or indirect. The subject matter of black drama during the period included historical events relevant to African Americans, the World War, campus life and the plight of migrant workers. This is a major turning point in the evolution of racial consciousness in Black American drama. African-Americans discovered that problems of race were not as serious as economic problems created because of class distinctions. There developed class co-operation between Whites and Blacks, who were equally hit by the depression. They joined hands in fighting for existence. Only a few playwrights had their works produced professionally early in 1940’s because this decade saw a temporary decline in playwriting due to world war II. Important themes of the plays in the forties include slum life, labour problem, and racial discrimination in jobs. Abraham Hills On Strivers Row, Theodore Brown’s Natural Man and Richard Wright’s adaptation of his own novel Native Son were prominent plays of 1940’s. These plays were noteworthy for their thematic diversity than those of previous decades.

Although no significant playwriting awards were won by black writers prior to 1950, these pioneer playwrights paved the way for the Golden Age of Black Theatre that was to follow. Through their courageous efforts they presented lives and concerns of black people on the American stage, attempted
to correct the distorted images and stereotypes that have too long been perpetuated by writers who lacked true knowledge of the black experience. Although many of the plays of these playwrights remain unproduced and unpublished and countless others have been lost, those that still survive stand as a monumental record of black artistry, culture, history and achievement which remain for the present and future generations to discover, to appreciate and enjoy.

Prior to the 1950’s playwriting was considered a profession for men. Efforts taken by W.E.B DuBois, Professors like Montgomery T Gregory and Alain Locke provided opportunities for black women not only to write plays about black experience, but also to publish and perform. Many topics that these black women writers focussed on were issues that could only be expressed by a black woman. For instance, if the child she carried for nine months would be sold into slavery or be a son who might one day be lynched, black woman is at the mercy of everybody. The white playwrights had previously written about black life, but most of their portraits of black people were degrading or unconvincing because they reproduced the old familiar degrading stereotypes such as mamies, maids, matriarchs, madams and over sexualized floozy. There were black male playwrights writing about black women, but their vision was different. They also limited the images of black women as immoral, wanton, frigid, overbearing or pathetically helpless. Outraged by the popular stereotype of blacks, black women playwrights took up the pen to express their realities. In this context the observation of Jean Miller is significant. Miller argues that
… their themes and their treatment of black women characters, however have differed from those of other playwrights. Often in plays by black men, the happiness of black women or their completeness in life depends upon strong blackman. In contrast to white authored dramas where black women have usually appeared as devoted servants to white families, as matriarchs, or as dumb, incompetent people, black women playwrights have told the black woman’s story… from slavery to freedom... from her point of view. [Miller, Images of Black Women 289]

Black women playwrights of the 1920’s and 1930’s were not professional playwrights because in those days they did not make their living from writing, but supported themselves with other full time jobs. But they captured the lives of the black people as no white or black male playwright could. Angelina Weld Grimke, Alice Dunbar, Nelson Georgia Douglas Johnson, May Miller, Mary Burrel, Smith Livingston, Marita Bonner were all original voices in the commercial theatre of the period. They provide the feminine perspective and their voices give credence to the notion that there was a ‘New Negro’ in America.

Viewing black life from a special angle Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry and Ntozake Shange worked to redefine the American stage that has traditionally been populated with stereotypes of blacks. The picture of black life that these dramatists offer is entirely different from that portrayed by white
female or black or White male dramatists. Known for her uncompromising approach to race and feminism, Alice Childress introduced themes such as miscegenation to the stage. She was devoted to the authentic portrayal of black life. Her plays include *Trouble in Mind* (1955) *Wine in the Wilderness* (1960), *Mojo* (1971) *In Strong* (1971) and *Wedding Band* (1973) Ntozake Shange first came into public prominence with her play *For Colored Girls* (1976), one of the first black feminist plays to speak honestly about male, female, relationship and denial of black women’s voice in American society. As an African-American woman, feminist, and an artist, Shange has shown on the American stage that black females are worthy of heroic stature and literary exploration. During the Civil Rights Movement, Hansberry emerged as the first black woman to present a drama on Broadway, *A Raisin in the Sun*. Never before had a black female playwright commanded such an attention in the American theatre. She defied the stereotypical portrayal of blacks commonly seen on the American stage by substituting realistic images. Her redefinition of black women as active and responsible participants in political future was surprising in 1959 and remains so in the present century. Her other plays include *The Sign in Sidney Brusteins Window* (1964) and *Les Blancs* (1970). *What use the Flowers* and *The Drinking Gourd* were her unpublished plays.

The black drama of the 1950’s reflected the frustrations peculiar to the African Americans. In majority of the plays ‘protest’ is veiled, but ‘violence’ as a solution is dismissed. The message in several of these plays, however, is that violence may soon become the only possible course of action. Mance Williams
argues that “plays during 1950’s expressed a new form of protest, one that not only exhorted black people to stand up for their rights but warned whites that Blacks would settle for nothing less than full share of the American Dream”. [William Mance 112]. Most of the plays written since 1950 were either accusation of white power structure in general or specific kind of attack on white liberals. A Medal for Willie by William Branch (1951), A Land Beyond River by Loften Mitchells and (1954) and Blues for Mister Charlie by James Baldwin (1964) were representative plays that directly accused white liberals. Baldwin’s importance as a black playwright also rests on another issue, the issue that distinguish one group of contemporary black playwrights from another. This is based on the question whether the black writer should direct himself to a white audience-to entertain them, or educate them about black people or should he direct himself to black audience-to educate them to an awareness of their needs. Baldwin’s The Amen Corner written in 1954 addressess the black audience and Blues for Mister Charlie written in 1964 addresses the white audience. By resolving his writings for both the audience, a dilemma which all Negro writers have been forced to face, Baldwin honestly exposed the racial injustice. Baldwin remained firmly rooted in the soil of his race and wrote two plays in his own way.

The 1960’s saw a more radical militant theatre with Amiri Baraka at its head William Mance has observed “whether the playwrights of the 1960’s fell into the category of realism or naturalism, Marxism or Structuralism the prevailing mood of the period was that of revolt outside and inside the theatre”
Black artists of this period presented the black materials through their plays for black audience with the unmistakably important purpose of defining and redefining the meaning of black lives. Black drama of this period is deeply involved in the problem of identity crisis and this adds to its significance. Black playwrights of the 60s can be grouped into three categories, angry, comic and aburdist. LeoRoi Jones and James Baldwin come under the first category, Ronald Millar and Ed Bullins can be grouped under the second category and to the third Adrienne Kennedy and Archie Shepp.

Black playwrights of 60s and 70s are engaged in a critical re-examination of western aesthetics, and the traditional role of the writer and the social function of art in the interest of constructing ‘a black aesthetic’. Black drama of this period is characterized by a spirit of rejection, a rejection of debased values in favour of values celebrating racial identity. It is not a literature of protest, but a literature of affirmation, a literature for all practical purposes. Frantz Fanon points out “… black artists are culture stabilizers, bringing back old values and introducing new ones…” [Larry Neal 30]. Black drama of 60’s and 70’s has thus developed out of a long line of black drama and is related to American literature by more than the use of the word “Black”.

A close examination of Black Drama from it beginning to the late 80’s reveals that there has been an evolution of consciousness in African American drama. This is an evolution of consciousness from invisibility to the visibility of the black as a separate dignified group of people. Up to the fifties black writing had been predominately “protest” literature. When there was
segregation and oppression as a common enemy, blacks had a common purpose and a strong urge to transform their deep rooted feeling of bitterness and scorn into art. In the post modern age they have become more and more the defenders of democracy. Realistic observation has developed into social protest. They believe that literature has social pertinence, and it should interpret what artist knows most fully and should help to effect changes that he desires most deeply.

Negro wiring in U.S. has been from the first to last a literature of necessity. It took more than a hundred years for the Negro race to produce their representative Negro authors. By exploring and exhibiting the rich complexity of Negro experience the black writer assisted his people in their self discovery and in the creation of an identity of their own. Black writers proved that art can be a weapon to liberate people. Plays of James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry played a dominant role in this evolution of black identity in a particularly striking way. They belong to two different periods and they are different from other black dramatists of their period in many respects. Black identity presented by a black male playwright and a black woman playwright differ in many aspects. They join hands in attacking white racism. The plays of these writers reflect a dissatisfaction over the social situation and express rage against social injustice. However there are differences also among these playwrights in their attitudes towards racial problems. But at the same time they have created a stir for greater than the usual excitement about talented black playwrights because they and their characters spoke in a tone that reflected the new militancy in the African-American circles.