CHAPTER-I

I

African – American Literature: An Overview

With the literary contributions of two Negro writers, Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Waddell Chestnut, African-American literature emerged as an important artistic creation at the turn of the twentieth century. A sizable number of other literary artists and critics of the 20's like W.E.B. Dubois, Benjamin Brawley, Carter G. Woodson, William Stanley Braithwaite, and Alain Locke immediately followed these two writers. During that period, a series of minor poets like Fenton Johnson, Joseph Cotter, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Alice Dunbar Nelson, and Anne Spencer emerged too. Apart from white American and Jewish literary artists, African-American artists were considered to be the “Third force” on the American literary scene. Interestingly enough, New York City's Harlem became a center of production of such Black intellectuals who started a kind of movement in literature, which was popularly known as the Harlem Renaissance. The Black poets of this movement like James Weldon Johnson, Claude Mckay, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Sterling Brown expressed their ancestral memories as well as reality of African-American life in their works. The novelists like Nella Larsen, Jean Toomer, Rudolph Fisher, Wallace Thurman and Zora Neale Hurston presented “a multifaceted mirror of much that belonged to the concrete actuality of their ordinary universe”.

The Harlem Renaissance of the 20s is popularly known as the first Black Renaissance too. It was a brief but powerful explosion of Black culture, which placed the Negro, for a time, at the heart of a national myth and dramatized a
self-image at odds with what was offered by American society as an adequate account of Black life. According to Bigsby, "The first Black Renaissance was born out of a distrust of rationalism, a celebration of sensuality, an atavistic drive which was seen paradoxically as the source of moral progress, a faith in a self sundered from social imperatives and belief in the virtues of improvisation in personal affairs". Hence the Black writings of the 20s tended to be neo-romantic, emphasizing a free self without responsibility to society.

Many novels and volumes of poetry were published during this period. Among the most important to the history of Black poetry is Locke's anthology *The New Negro* (1925), and *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), edited by the poet, James Weldon Johnson. The image of Africa repeatedly appeared in the Black poetry of the 1920s. It stood at the source of an innocent lyricism in Black life, large driven out by the realities of America. It was a clue to the lost dimension of Black identity or to a grace which could be glimpsed still in an occasional word or gesture. These poets struggled to define the Negro and his place in America and in the world. Their mood was one of awakening militancy and pride. Among the important novels, Dubois's *Dark Princes* (1928), James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones : Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (1927) are remarkable.

In the context of the Harlem Renaissance, Suresh Chandra comments:

It was a successful Negro literary movement in the sense that Black Art was limited to a superficial elitist level, patronized to some extent, by the whites. The Black Art was not known to the commoners in Harlem. The Blackman was denied to know his history and Black
experience. He was forced to look at the world in the eyes of the white.

Afterwards, however the Blackmen of America developed a strong consciousness, which was deliberately reflected in their contemporary Black writings.

The exuberance of the Harlem Renaissance glowed for a few years, but gradually faded during the Depression into the disillusioned silence. During the thirty odd years between the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, Langston Hughes continued to write and several new writers like Sterling Brown and Robert Hayden emerged. These writers, most of them academics, were not a part of Harlem Renaissance. They neither wrote of the splendors of Africans, nor of the orthodoxy of their race, which characterized the Harlem Renaissance. They were more influenced by their Anglo-American contemporaries. Margaret Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks and Melvin B. Tolson were some other African-American writers of post Harlem Renaissance. However, the writings of Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes of the 30s were much more relevant in this context. Having a keen observation, Nathan A. Scott. Jr. opines:

Stretching from the late 1920s into the middle years of the 30s, a happy and bright time of Black American literature followed. This time Black American literature came with a new promise, new vigour, and reflected much of mythical as well as intellectual ideas. The Black literary artists of this period were known to be the New Negro.
They presented a deterministic world in which the Negro became a powerful product of American social forces. As a result, the 1930s witnessed a shift in emphasis for the Negro. The theme of violence was offered as a sacrament in this period. Countee Cullen's *The Black Christ* (1930) powerfully presents this theme of violence. The Black writers of this period demanded a strong leftist protest against racial prejudice. The writers of the 20s were severely criticized by the Black American writers of the 30s as they were not keen on presenting the leftist outlook in their writings, Langston Hughes' *Nothing Without Laughter* (1930), *The Ways of White Folks* (1934), and his play *The Mulatto* (1935) are appropriate writings in this context.

The gradual development of Black literature in America is again marked in the 40s as well as in the 50s with the writings of Black literary artists like Richard Wright, Carl Ruthven Offord, Chester Hime, Ann Petry, Williard Mothey and William Garden Smith. In addition, minor writers like James Weldon Johnson, Owen Dodson, and Robert Hayden represent the literature of Black Americans of the 40s quite independently. The name of Richard Wright as a famous Black American novelist and social critic of these decades needs special mention. His popular novels are *Native Son* (1940), *The Outsider* (1953), *Savage Holiday* (1954), *The Long Dream* (1958) and *Eight Men* (1961). These writings chiefly chronicle the Black intellectuals' search for identity in the American Society. Richard Wright presents a similar theme in his collection of short stories entitled *Uncle Tom's Children*. He seems to dramatize a resistant Black identity co-existing uneasily with an equally powerful desire to stress the Negro's role as a symbol of deprivation. The predominant tone of these books is Black assertiveness in a
passive Black American Society. Wright, thus chooses to see the Negro as an appropriate image not only for the Americans, but also for man. For the first time, the voice of the US Negroes sounded truly human. The universal note of it struck deep into the hearts of men living an existence full of pain and terror.

Margaret Walker, a Black American poet of the 40's, became popular for her writing *For My People*, which won an award for its portrayal of love of race and culture of Black Americans. The Black American literature of 40s was tyrannously dominated by the procedures of documentary naturalism. Almost all the Black Writers were trying to mingle the purpose of Black American People with their literary artistry.

The Black American Literature of the 50s marked another step of development. The Black Writers like Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin were welcomed for their assertion that in many respects the Black experience of dispossession and alienation was akin to the American experience. They transformed social fact into metaphor. Indeed, as the racial situation became the principal moral problem confronting America, these Negro writers became a kind of mediator between America and its principles, between a troubled present and a past which refused to stay buried. The Negro stood as an evidence of the failure of American liberal principles and thus became the chief advocate of those principles. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* constitutes the ethos of Black life in America, as represented by his unnamed young Black protagonist. Owing to his simplicity, he is tortured and humiliated among the whites. So from the North, he moves to New York and leads an invisible life. Other Black fiction writers like Jullian Mayfield, Williard Mothey and Warren Miller, were also more or less
spirited by social consciousness as well as by literary talent. But James Baldwin superseded all of them. James Baldwin's popular fictions like Go Tell It on the Mountain and The Fire Next Time speak of aggressive racialism. In the first novel, he speaks of a boy's character: a sensitive Negro boy has to find his way toward some liberating sense of his own human possibilities in the repressive atmosphere of a primitive religion of Jesus and Satan which is fervently celebrated in his Harlem Storefront Church and fiercely administered in his family. But when he faces a series of restrictions and a dogmatic religion, he decides that he must revolt. Because of this kind of approach in Black literature, Baldwin lasted to be a predominant as well as an awakening Black American writer of 60s.

Timely social and political events have always influenced people to bring about a reformation in thought and action. As regard to our assessment of Afro-Americans, we find that till the beginning of 60s, they seem to pursue their effort for a Black renaissance. In the mean time with the assassination of Malcolm X, a famous Black American leader preaching non-violence to achieve Black liberation, in 1965, Afro-American history marked a turning point. His death convinced many of them that violence was unavoidable in the struggle for equality. The cry for "Black power" and the belief in the political expediency of separatism had also a major literary impact, producing poetry workshops in every urban centres. Many Black poets, critics, novelists and playwrights, who followed the parameters of the new Black Aesthetic, accepted the fundamental tenets that literature must take its place in the liberation of Black Americans, that it must do so by reflecting the Black experience, that it must reject the literary standard of an oppressive society, and that it must work to promote the sense of Black self
In the 1960s, in addition, a cultural and mythological consciousness arose among the Black Americans. A series of Black nationalists came out with a quest for self-identity. They were quite daring and enthusiastic in their approach. They substituted the term "Negro" by the term "Black" and started the second Black Renaissance in America. So the second Black Renaissance emerged as a movement of what Bigsby calls, "Romantic assertiveness and expressed the revolutionary attitude of the new literary talents." Thus the African-American literature of the 60s witnessed the upsurge of a distinct Black modernism and artistic avant-garde that stood apart from the main stream of American literature both in its inspiration and motivation. The revolutionary upsurge of Black Americans, aesthetic and political, was a hysterical assertion of a distinct Black identity and nationalism. The winds of self-awareness, which had started sweeping the Black American mind since the 20s, suddenly became a volcanic eruption in the 60s. A victim of centuries of servitude and slavery to white supremacy and the object of the Whiteman's contempt, fun and pity, the American Negro realized the need for a self-gratifying image of himself. Accustomed for long to cherishing the values of the dominant American culture, wherein the aesthetic and cultural norms, that could have been distinctly his own, were submerged, the Black American had to struggle for an identity both against the oppressive power of the dominant culture, and the servile accumulations of his own mind. The sense of persecution, coupled with a feeling of entrapment in the values of the oppressive culture that made him look for the white man's image of him rather than his own self
confidence, created a hysterical state of mind in the Black American and generated an inclination and proclivity to violence. While the White American reacted violently against his own frustrating sense of cultural dysfunction, vacuum and failure, the Black American reacted violently against the sense of inferiority forced on him, and against the socio-political injustice done to him. The White American's revolt against the failure of his culture took the form of an enthusiastic receptiveness to any strange or iconoclastic idea. However, the revolt essentially lacked a positive cultural or intellectual goal. In contrast, the Black American's revolt against the established American culture, which annihilated him as much as it was self-annihilating, assumed the form of a positive search into his submerged racial past and a revival of distinctness of his cultural identity. Thus, the social, political, cultural, racial and mythological consciousness of the Black Artists of this period took the form of an artistic explosion and brought into being what was called as "The Black Arts Movement". The important writers of this movement were the poet-playwright Le Roi Jones (who now calls himself Imamu Amiri Baraka), Larry Neal, Ed Bullins, Don L. Lee, Hoyt Fuller and the novelist John Oliver Killers. According to Larry Neal:

The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black power concept. As such it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black Americans. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radial reordering of the western cultural
aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology.  

Ralph Ellison's *Shadow and Act*, James Baldwin's *Nobody Knows My Name* and *The Fire Next Time*, became very popular in the 60s in addition to the works of Baraka like *Dutchman, The Slave, The Baptism, The Toilet, Experimental Death Unit # 1, A Black Mass* and *Slaveship*. These prolific writers were followed by Ed Bullins and Larry Neal who stood again as pioneers of the Black Arts Movement. Bullins' *Clara's Ole Man, In New England Winter, The Electronic Nigger, A Son Come Home*, and *The Duplex*, etc., and Larry Neal's *The Glorious Monster* and *In An Upstate Motel* earned great glory among the Black American community. Other important playwrights of the Black Arts Movement were Adrienne Kennedy, Ron Milner, Douglas Tumer Ward, Charles Gordone and Lonne Elder who produced very powerful plays being influenced by Baraka. The other artists of credit were the poets like Conrad Rivers, Sonia Sanches, Nikki Giovanni, Mari Evans and Etheridge Knight. In the 60s and 70s, we come across a kind of Black poetry known as "street poetry", in the hands of Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka, and Nikki Giovanni etc. Here we come across the fictions of William Gardner and Julian MayField. A couple of experimentalists like Ishmael Reed and Nathaniel West come before our eyes in the 70s too. Nathaniel West's *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* is a remarkable work of art. Along with them we find Clarence Major, Charles Wright, John Wideman, Leon Forrest, W. M. Kelley, John Killers, Renald Fair, Nathan Heard, Margaret Walker and Cyrus Colter. Most of them were fictionists. They were generally committed to "ways of construing the world that require to be placed at one or another point on the traditional continuum of realism and naturalism".  

This prolonged stream of writing gradually gave rise to the highly talented Writers in the 80s. They were Paule Marsall, Al Young, Kristin Hunter, Toni Morison, Alice Walker etc. Some of the gifted artists like Margaret Danner, Bob Kaufman, Curmie Price, Michael Harper, Melvin Tolson, Gwendolyn Brooks and Robert Hayden were also there but they were not so much influenced by the so called Black aesthetic.

African-American literature is vast and varied. It is represented by a number of talented Black writers who have contributed a lot not only to ethnic or protest literature but also to the American literature in general. The world, which they most thoroughly know is, of course, a world from which white Americans have withdrawn. But this retreat of the white Americans has entailed an immense cost, as both the communities are so deeply involved with one another. Though the lives of Black men and white men on the continent have been mixed up for more than three hundred years, the whites refuse to acknowledge the identify of the Blacks and torture them like anything. Thus it is a challenge for the Black writers to explore and exhibit the rich complexity of Negro life in their works. They are not only to assist their own people in developing a deeper understanding of themselves but also to make them agents of self-discovery for the nation at large. Black American literature has thus struggled to exist till the present time dealing with all the realities of Black American life. It is a literature which makes us feel that the power of language can alter consciousness and redeem the human reality.
II

African-American Drama: Its Origin and Development

In the nineteenth century, Black Americans showed a strong predilection for theatrical performance when theatre was frowned upon in America as the source of evil. Along with the Blues, the Minstrel show wherein the Blacks masked and mimed a ritual that alluded to the several things of their African past and signified a whole lot of their communal beliefs, was, in fact, the earliest American theatrical tradition—"the source of all that can be called representative American theatre, is Africanism."8

African-American drama has its own identity in the world today. It has already contributed a lot of trends to the world of drama. In the twentieth century actually Ridgely Torrence's *Three Plays for a Negro Theatre* (1917) marked the beginning of American Negro Theatre. Although Torrence was white, the plays offered the Negro his first real opportunity in serious drama. Then there was another serious and primary Black American playwright Willis Richardson, who wrote *The Chipwoman's Fortune* in 1923. It was opened at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem before moving down town. Since it was the first play ever written by a Black playwright, this was of great popularity among the Black Americans. It is a one-act morality play in which Silas Green and his wife are seen struggling to overcome their hardship. Racial humiliation is hinted at which provides a moral context for the play. In this way some attempts were made in the 20s to write and enact plays by the Black American playwrights. They emphasized on the establishment of Theatres for this purpose. In the 20s particularly, attempts were
made to establish a national Negro Theatre for the development of Negro playwrights, musicians, actors, dancers and artists.

The Negro units of the Federal Theatre of 30s and The American Negro Theatre of 40s also tried a lot to establish a tradition of Black American Drama. As a result, a gifted playwright like Langston Hughes emerged in America. Hughes' *The Mulatto* (1935) reflected symbolic and literal theme of Afro-American rebellion. *Mulatto* is the portrait of a Southern plantation owner, colonel Norwood, his brown mistress Cora and their children of varying shades from dark to ivory yellow to almost white. The youngest, Robert, is in revolt against the way of life established by Col. Norwood and accepted by his wife, the other children and the community are symbolized by the figure of Fred Higgins. Col. Norwood says that they teach good manners, not to be afraid of work and to respect white folks. The daughter, however, replies that she has been taking up cooking and sewing too. Col. Norwood's daughter wants to teach in the local school but he brutally denies her permission to do so. The question and answer sum up the white expectation and the Black acquiescence.

Robert's revolt, after many confrontations, ends with his killing his White Father, a symbolic act, which anticipates latter attitudes. The mob tries to lynch him, and he commits suicide. Before he does his brown mother, the mistress of Col. Norwood, opens her eyes to the realities of the situation: it is, symbolically, the opening of the eyes of all Negroes allied to whites in an accepted subordinate position. It was the most famous and one of the longest running plays of that time. In the years following the World War-II, the American Negro playwrights
started writing plays to be enacted effectively on the stage. Especially in New York city, large corps of gifted Negro actors and actresses started acting in the plays produced by Negro playwrights in the late forties and early fifties either in Harlem or in down town theaters of Off Broadway. Some of the playwrights of that time included Theodore Ward, Oliver Pitcher, Alice Childress, William Branch etc. In 1953, a young Black dramatist named Louis Peterson achieved great popularity for his drama *Take a Giant Step*. The play is a sensitive exploration of the difficulties experienced by a Negro youngster who, as he moves into adolescence, is shut out from the circles in his Philadelphia neighborhood of the white friends with whom he has grown up. Temperamentally unfitted for the rude comradeship of the local Negro taverns, he is thrown back on a grandmother wonderfully affectionate but unable to offer the kind of companionship for which the boy yearns.

Then in the successive years the other Black dramatists like William Branch, Alice Childress, Loften Mitchell, Langston Hughes etc, went on writing plays too. However, when the word 'Negro' was replaced by 'Black', a radical self-examination was forced upon the United States which was reflected in theatre. Loraine Hansberry, a young Negro writer, captivated the public imagination at the end of the fifties through her play *Raisin in the Sun* (1959) which accounts for the struggle of a Negro family to escape the daunting dreariness of the Black ghetto. We see a besieged Negro family attempting to find a better house to live in. They find it but it is in a white neighbourhood and one of its representatives tries to buy them off. After many vicissitudes, comes the act of defiance, which ends the play on a note of hope. But this note is not accepted to later Black playwrights.
Other dramatists like Adrienne Kennedy, Ron Milner, Douglas Turner Ward, Richard Right, Nat Turner, Charles Gordone and Lonne Elder represented collectively an extraordinary body of talent, on which indeed any hope for the renewal of the American Theatre must in large part rest. They exhibited a very considerable diversity of viewpoints and emphasis. But though they were not all committed to policies of cultural separatism, theirs was a vision of the theatre, which conceived it to be an agency of truth-telling, of enlightenment, of social change, and possibly even of revolution. Moreover, whatever might be the pitch of their militancy, all of them considered their primary business to be that of "a Black man talking to other Black men, not talking simply to an audience of middle class, credit-card carrying whites". Thus their dramas became more purposive, more reflective of social and cultural values.

Specifically to be a Black writer in the 60s, one was to offer himself up as a "sacrificial victim, public spokesman, potential quisling, hero, villain, a virtual Manichean image of Black society itself. To be a Black writer was not a career; it was a fate. And, in turn, each was seared by the heat of a burning conviction about the appropriate range, direction and motivation of Black art". In this context, Steele says, "Black dramatists of the 1960s have openly embraced the idea of 'ritual' in modern Black drama." Baraka's Black Arts Repertory Theatre and its dramas provided a model of direct relationship between the artist and the community, which was the essence of the Second Black Renaissance. In its collaborative nature, drama also stood as an image of Black cooperative endeavor. The dramatists of the period tried to
create an idea among their people that life and art were synonymous and art was simply the framing of experience, a means of drawing attention to the dramatic potential of lives which were themselves self-dramatizing mechanisms. The Black writers went to the street because that was where his audience lay, that was where he could find those whose consciousness he wished to assault with the truth of their existence and their cultural and political potential. The Black Theatre of the 60s always exerted a powerful influence on those whom the stage and the platform seem generically connected, and for the Black Americans there was a special potency in such a communal art. Thus, the number of theatre groups expanded dramatically, with Black Arts Theatres being established in cities across the country. The Free Southern Theatre took plays to those who had never been exposed to drama before. This was not a solemn theatre, but it was also not a repetition of the Black reviews and musicals of the 1920s, though Broadway continued to capitalize on Black vitality. For the most part, it was a theatre which either presented the daily reality of the Black Experience of America (as did Ed Bullins), or the proposed Black Revolutionary models (as did Amiri Baraka), or enacted rituals based on Black life (as did Barbara Ann Jeer).

Primarily Black drama was rejected as it became ineffective in confronting double audience: its own Black group and the white Americans. So Alain Locke tried to bring a possible solution to this dilemma when he published an anthology of plays entitled, *Plays of Negro Life*, in which he called for a National Negro Theatre, where the Black playwrights and the Black actors will interpret the soul of their people in a way to win the attention and admiration of the world. It was only in the 60s, the leading Black intellectuals like Lonne Elder, Amiri Baraka and
Harold Cruse thought in terms of making Black Theatre more and more effective. In the mean time the Free Southern Theatre declared to produce plays for people who had no theatre and asserted the dominance of Black audience instead of white when plays were enacted and persuaded the Black Americans accordingly. It was popularly called FST. It was born from a desire to provide work for the Black writers and artists, and to serve the Black community by gradually strengthening its position. When Amiri Baraka demonstrated the Black Arts Repertory Theatre in Harlem, the range of plays produced by FST gradually broadened.

The most important movement of the 60s was the attempt to create a Black Theatre - a development that placed drama at the heart of the Black Arts Movement. The Howard Players, the Negro People's Theatre, the Harlem Suitcase Theatre, the Rose McClendon Players, and the Negro Playwrights' Company, staged plays based on the requirement of the Black Community.

In the 60s, Black Theatre became less a question of establishing specific repertory groups, though Ed Bullins' New Lafayette Theatre was one such, than of creating a drama responsive to the needs and interests of Black people and performed in the Black communities, which it served. And the heart of this enterprise creating the institutions, which could facilitate it and elaborate the images, the myths and the forms of this new theatre, was most crucially, a single man — Amiri Baraka. Similarly Ed Bullins emerged with varieties of plays reflecting Black experience and Black revolutionary consciousness. The playwrights like Le Roi Jones, Charles Patterson, William Patterson, Clarence Reed, Johnny Moore, Ed Bullins, Larry Neal, Ron Milner, Ben Caldwell, Jimmy
Stewart, Joe White, Charles Fuller, Aisha Hughes, Carol Freeman, Jimmy Garret produced a number of plays with excellent artistic qualities in the sixties that extended till the early 70s too.

The plays produced for the Black Arts Movement were no longer pathological studies. The dialogue was essentially internal to the Black community. The unavoidable ironies of protest literature, which appeals against injustice, must inevitably be made to those who are themselves the source of that injustice, and the importance of the victim becomes the source of the moral claim.

The Black drama and the revolutionary theatre of the sixties was essentially a dramatic and theatrical corollary of the New Black music and its new sensibility and consciousness. While the music expressed the new self conscious and self-confident spirit of Blackness, the Black Americans, in the sixties, required this medium that would not only document their lives but dramatise the process of white oppression, the process of their struggle against the oppression, and also against their own servile acceptance of the oppression and the process of evolving a self-gratifying and vibrating cultural nationalism of their own.

The Black revolutionary theatre and the drama of the Black experience of 1960s yielded significant dramatic endeavours of the Blacks in the decade initially by having pursuit of the western liberal values and dramatic norms. Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) which heralds the Black drama of 60s, illustrates the rising liberal consciousness of the Blacks who seek a solution to the problems of their oppression through an appeal to western humanist values. This continued to be the trend in Baraka, Bullins and Larry Neal too.
Black revolutionary theatre originated in the Black Arts Movement, in the Black Religious and Spiritual sects, and in the Third World revolutionary, cultural and political societies. The Black dramatists followed the ways of the National Black Theatre at Harlem. They wanted to raise the level of consciousness of Black American people by making them realise their existing conditions of oppression and exploitation. By providing entertainment and enlightenment through their plays, the Black dramatist wanted to make the Black people politically conscious so that their spirits can be liberated and minds can be strengthened. Their main aim was to make the Blacks conscious of their Power, their culture and their music so that they can be united to realise their distinct position in America.

We find such an enormous product of plays of the Black American dramatists that it imprints a conscious, reformative and artistic mark in the heart of the readers. It is obviously a milestone established under the Black Arts Movement that lifts up the Black consciousness to the maximum level. The group of dramatists under the Black Arts Movement of 60s uses their instinctive folk sense to rediscover all that they ever know. They reflect racial consciousness, sub-consciousness of The Third World people, Black cultural nationalism, Black revolutionary nationalism, dance, as in Black life style and patterns, Black religion in its numerous forms – gospel, Negro spiritualism of African spirit, Black mysticism, magic, myth, history, fable and legend, Afro-American nigger street styles and of course Black music.

Apart from Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, and Larry Neal, we come across other important Black American dramatists like Adrienne Kennedy, Jinny Garrett, James Baldwin and Cleaver etc. in the 60s. Ron Milner’s *Who's Got His Own* strips
bare the clashing attitudes of a contemporary Afro-American family. Milner's concern is with legitimate manhood and morality. The family in the play is in search of its conscience, or more precisely its own definition of life on the day of its Patriarch's death; Tim and his family are forced to examine the inner fabric of their lives: the lies, self deceits and sense of powerlessness in a white world. Tim's mother is a representative of a generation of Christian Black women who have implicitly understood the brooding violence lurking in their men. And with this understanding they have interposed themselves between their men and the object of their violence—the white men. Thus unable to direct his violence against the oppressor, the Black man becomes more frustrated and the sense of powerlessness deepens. Lacking the strength to be a man in the white world, he turns against his family. Jimmy Garrett's *We Own the Night* is another play of great importance. It takes place during an armed insurrection. As the play opens, we see the central characters defending a section of the city against attacks by white police. Johnny, the protagonist, is wounded; some of his brothers intermittently fire at attacking forces, while others look for medical help. A doctor arrives, forced at gunpoint. The wounded boy's mother also comes. She is a female Uncle Tom who berates the brothers and their cause. She tries to get Johnny leave. She is hysterical. Johnny begins a vicious attack on his mother, accusing her of emasculating his father—a recurring theme in the sociology of Black community.

Adrienne Kennedy, a Black woman playwright, proved herself to be one of the most articulate writers of the Black American experience. Her plays are highly intellectual in nature and express the "inner self" of the playwright. A sensitive
Black woman and a mulatto, she regards writing as “an outlet for inner, psychological confusion and questions stemming from childhood”, and a creative way to figure out “the ‘why’ of things”. The individual’s struggle with self and internalised social and cultural forces is the focal point of most of her plays. In three of her plays *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1962), *The Owl Answers* (1963), and *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* (1976), the protagonists are Black women who fail to unite the fragmented elements of their identities into harmonic, dynamic wholes. *Funnyhouse of a Negro* presents an agonising picture of the inner torment of a young girl named Sarah who can’t bear the pressure of being Black in America. Her confused identity linked with her ambiguous feelings towards her white mother and Black father leads Sarah to find herself among four historical figures who share her voice: Queen Victoria, the Duchess of Hapsburg, Jesus and Patrice Lumumba; Sarah’s conflicting racial histories are illustrated but never resolved by the figures that serve as her masks. Far from empowering her, these characters mask and trap Sarah in a role of self-hatred, fear, and the inability to integrate her personality that leads to her suicide. In *The Owl Answers*, the Owl is the controlling metaphor anchoring the heroine’s problem of identity with the worlds of her white and Black parents and her many selves image. The central figure, “SHE who is Clara ... the OWL”, seeks her identity through historical figures and powerful animal symbols. James Baldwin’s *Blues for Mr Charlie* (1964) reflects an impassioned and dangerously realistic class struggle between Meridian, the Black Dr. King like figure, and Richard, who seems to embody Malcolm X’s disdain for non-violence and passive resistance. The Play’s threat to the establishment was that it actually questioned non-violence, with Meridian not only questioning whether religion has not just been a substitute for
his enslaved humanity, but in the climax of this intensely emotional drama raising both the Bible and the gun from the pulpit as symbols of leadership. He has also written another play *Amen Corner*. In both the plays of Baldwin, we find an older tradition to the extent that he himself stands primarily as a Black spokesman addressing white audience. They are plays of protest, of anger, of documentation, and of propaganda, more or less successful in their attempt to make white audience feel ashamed and guilty. Even when white critics find fault with these plays for their literary and dramatic clumsiness and their historical distortions, they approve of their humanist spirit and of the author’s values. This is an important aspect of Black drama too. Similarly in Elridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*, Mrs. Mann is dressed in frills and draped in blond locks that mark her as frivolous, superficial, and innocent, yet she is unknowingly capable of causing great destruction – the vain southern belle who undresses in front of the stable boy and then tells her “Daddy” that he peeked. She is a woman-child, playing a game with the Black male in which her position affords her the privilege of never losing. Hebert Stokes’ *The Man Who Trusted the Devil Twice* is a play in which the hero, a high school student, revolts against the school’s Principal, who is also his father, and an irredeemable Uncle Tom, who trusted the Devil (White man) twice. A young woman playwright Salimu’s *Growing into Blackness* also speaks of the Black consciousness as a young Black girl is asked by her mother to get rid of her Afro or leave the home. After considerable inner struggle, she leaves home to live with a group of revolutionaries in a gesture of revolutionary solidarity. Ben Caldwell’s *Prayer Meeting* or *The First Militant Minister* is also a remarkable play of this period. A Black burglar, who happens to manifest a strong revolutionary point of view, breaks into the home of a Black Minister who preaches restraint to
his people after the murder of a Black man by white Policemen by telling that it is what God desires. When the preacher comes home before the burglary is finished, the burglar hides in the closet of the bedroom. The preacher comes in, not knowing the burglar is present, and drops to his knees entreating the Lord to stop his people from resorting to violent action for their brother's death. But, from the closet, the burglar poses as the Lord himself, and shouts at the minister in disgust. By convincing the preacher that he is the Lord answering his prayer, he shames him into a conversion. Soon he is prepared to lead his people in a protest march against the murderers of the Black man. He removes a revolver from his drawer and places it on the bed stand beside his Bible. He addresses the Black people that everybody should be ready to fight against this murder, suffering, oppression and exploitation.

In this way the development of African-American drama is steady and satisfactory. Moreover, the varieties of plays that come out after the Second World War till the 60s are of great social and literary importance, particularly, the development of drama in the 60s gives us a clear signal of its immense future. So this needs much more exposure.

NOTES


3 Suresh Chandra, "Black Consciousness in White Persons: A Note on Some Representative Black African and American Fiction", *Colonial Consciousness*


8 Scott. Jr. 334

9 Ibid.
