CHAPTER I

A Bird's-Eye View

Afro-American literature is supercharged with a super-abundance of rage and grief, pain and misery, of being black in America. Stockpiled over three centuries, the resentments and frustrations have snow-balled into an expression of protest against the injustices of an inhumane society that permitted slavery at a time when slavery was obsolete on this earth and enacted brutal laws circumscribing the physical, mental and spiritual activities of the Negro. Slavery and racism were institutionalised in America on the basis of the Negro's presumed inferiority embedded in the white psyche which placed a low index of evaluation on his black skin.

It is against this backdrop of social unrest and dissent that Afro-American literature is written. Social events determine the course of literature and since ethnic literature is social in content, it is directly affected by society, race, climate, prevailing anger and frustrations.

The Tartarean rules to keep the black man in place could not, however, contain his spirit. He protested and his protest became a declaration against his subjugation in a terrifying systematic manner by the white majority. The intellectuals responded angrily. They organised protest in their writings and vociferously tried to awaken the conscience of the white man who was perpetrating diabolic acts of bigotry against the black man. The black colour of their skin inspired them to transform the experiences of their race into a heart-rending tale of woe. A literary survey of their writings furnishes
a coherent and developing account of the traditions of Afro-American literature and provides an account of contemporary society and general characteristics of various literary traditions in a way that enables one to understand the growth of particular literary traditions during particular periods.

Richard Wright was the first Negro writer of stature to swing into the literary orbit. From the threshold of adolescence he had no doubts about the kind of profession he wanted to adopt -- he sought, with unflustering determination, to dedicate his powers to writing and use words as weapons to defend the Negro and wrest dignity for him, which the white man had so long denied him. He became identified with Negro struggle for political freedom and self identity.

Richard Wright was eminently a writer of the Protest Tradition -- dissent was in his blood. In fact, he was the founder of a new and powerful philosophic system i.e. the Protest Tradition. He prepared the way and his influence on the writers of the decade was remarkably powerful. No author, since then, has been able to achieve in measure his degree of success in the protest theme.

Richard Wright's writings were an eloquent mirror of the black experience, infolded by a hostile world of hostile whites wielding power. He was witness to the harsh injustices measured out to the black man, the Negro's oppression by pain and terror, the frustrating discrimination and tormenting humiliations heaped upon him. He wrote with extreme fury of the brutal white society that had been base
enough to aggravate the sufferings of a mentally mutilated Negro. The Negro was a victim of a blistering and consuming racism, with no individual freedom and with less rights than are given to man. Wright castigated despotism of the judicial system that harmonised with the flinty-hearted white disposition. The law machinery must bear the shame of having been a ready instrument of the persecutors, he declared.

Writing of life as he saw it, Wright's literary creations became one battlefield of consistent and continuous protest against and criticism of white society. His biographical works were correspondingly violent and full of bitterness. They were an epitome of the American Negro's experience. In shrill, strident tones, full of the aches and despair of his race, he pleaded for a more liberal treatment and attitude towards the Negro.

Wright's harrowing tales dealing with the human tragedy of the Negro and the violently repressive environment in which he lived, wrung the hearts of the people. Native Son, in 1940, gave a powerful emotional jolt to the white conscience. Black Boy, in 1945, was a libel on the white race. The white society rose up in arms against the book and Theodore Bilbo, a white senator, on June 25, 1945, declared, "Black Boy ... is the dirtiest, filthiest, lousiest, most obscene piece of writing that I have ever seen in print. I would hate to have a son or daughter of mine permitted to read it; it is so filthy and so dirty".
The protagonist of the book typified the day-to-day experiences of the Negro who lived in a tormenting inferno of misery — which Senator Bilbo found so repulsively "filthy and dirty".

In the sixties there were stirring new scenes in the literary field — an extravaganza of new forms and high spirits was emerging as the Second Harlem Renaissance, engendering new hope of emancipation and equality for the Negro. "Blackness" became a source of strength and signified special intensity of emotion. The Harlem Renaissance evolved into the Black Aesthetic Tradition and the militant writings forked off as the Black Aesthetic Movement. From the sixties onwards both these literary movements ran parallel to each other though they were diametrically opposed in ideology.

The votaries of the Black Aesthetic Tradition wanted to universalise their writings; racial protest was abandoned; colour was incidental in the themes. Literature was enriched, for it refused to communicate only through reality; fantasy became a vehicle of expression. Reality and fantasy overlapped so freely that the demarcations between the two were blurred. Cosmic satire, "Blues", vaudeville, mythopoesis, myths, Voodoo, HooDoo, Neo-HooDoo etc. became the thematic frameworks around which plots were fabricated. Literary streams flowed out in all directions, for they were disinclined to be confined by older literary traditions.

Ishmael Reed was an outstanding literary name in the late sixties and seventies. He occupied a unique place amongst the votaries
of the Black Aesthetic Tradition. He expanded his mental horizons past the boundaries of the mundane world and journeyed into realms of fancy beyond the normal life. His strategy of exploration meandered through mythopoesis, cosmic satire, "Blues", magic of primitive Africa and all other themes that were popular at the time. To his prolific mind, teeming with fancies, nothing established had a validity. He was fascinated by what lay beyond reason. He used fantasy as a means of giving expression to his state of mind that could not be communicated through conventional habits of thought. His literary genre was varied, for he experimented with a fusion of the grotesque and the burlesque, legend and myth, interpolations and digressions of past and future and ridiculed everything on the American scene. Adopting new approaches, he freed himself from the tyrannical requirements of the traditional forms. His amiable and harmless characters were absurd and lively enough to make us merry. In their dialogues one heard a blend of wit and humour. In the great literary world of tides, currents and whirlpools, his loosely constructed yarns buffeted the readers on frolic-some waves of laughter.

Ishmael Reed's writings are not racial; he feels the Negro is not to be laughed at or wept over. The maudlin theme songs, revolving around the sorry plight of the black man, do not arouse his pity or sympathy. The old stereotype of Negroes caricatured in literature are destroyed by him. The slaves in his books are cunning and outwit both blacks and whites to further their own ambitions. Both blacks and whites become victims of his scatological wit, for he feels,
beneath the skin, man has universal characteristics. He appeals to both races to step out of their parochial confines of prejudice and warped hostility. Thus, Ishmael Reed proves to be a true exponent of the Black Aesthetic Tradition which is antonymously opposed to the Protest Tradition in its outlook.

Towards the close of the forties, in 1948 to be precise, James Baldwin made a spectacular debut in the literary world by sounding the first blast of dissent in the battle against the Protest Tradition. To an astonished world he declared that the Protest Tradition would lead nowhere, for it spewed out propaganda suffused with a lot of rage; rage produced heat but no light. He vehemently criticised Richard Wright, Harriet Beecher Stowe and other adherents of this creed. One can designate him as the avant courier of the second Harlem Renaissance which stressed upon integration.

Consequently, James Baldwin pronounced a new turn to the literary tradition and so great was his influence that the earlier enthusiasm for the Protest Tradition died down. The writers began ignoring the contemporary scene. Hopeful of a better world, they began nurturing universality in their writings. Aiming at integration, they began exploring new themes in order to become a vital part of America's cultural tapestry. The writings of this period attest to this fundamental perception of universality, for they deal with an all encompassing human nature, they articulate the black man's individual,
social and sexual identity. The Negro's aspirations, his acceptance of his racial heritage and religion etc. are all mirrored in the literature of the time.

James Baldwin was a master of the essay form, a novelist of passionate intensity and a fervid playwright. His writings were a profound commitment to life and art. Writing with deep insight and fearless honesty, he talked in terms of man's freedom and dignity. He pleaded with America to reconstruct its social edifice on foundations of freedom, justice and humanity. He focused his vision chiefly on men and their relationships.

Baldwin's painfully tragic fiction was derived from a universal source of suffering and stressed the Negro's ambiguity in society resulting in his loss of personality. He portrayed the Negro in realistic terms and his insistence was on love. Colour had trapped him, as it had trapped his race -- all his life he waged a grim and intense struggle to cope with it. Through his writings, he sought moral and ethical escape.

Baldwin's writings of the fifties were optimistic and held out hope. He synthesised art and personal experience. A new commitment towards integration was evident in his fiction which was devoid of protest. His first novel Go Tell It on the Mountain (1952) had the motif of religion. There were no white characters to give it a colour of racism. Giovanni's Room (1954) was woven around love
and sex. His *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) was a compilation of personal experiences.

In response to his growing colour consciousness, reinforced by a love of freedom and his desire to escape the literary classification of a "Negro writer", Baldwin went into self-exile to France. Not being a recluse, he was affected by the great upheaval in America. Collaborating with the spirit of the times, he returned to his native land in 1957. On an assignment from *Look*, he made a tour of the South and became acquainted with the racial climate prevailing there. The visit spelt an end to his naive dream of America being the Promised Land. He felt America had ignored the fundamental principles enshrined in the tenets of Christianity and humanity and the American Dream.

There was a shift in Baldwin's uniquely personal vision and in his attitude in the face of the changing situation. He reversed his opinion of earlier years i.e. to avoid conflict between his writings and racial identity and between his artistic and social sensibilities. He became an ardent admirer of Martin Luther King Jr. and champion of the Civil Rights Movement.

Baldwin's artistic sensitivities underwent a change; his moderateness gave way to a truculent 'belligerence. The Protest Tradition he had denigrated a decade ago became a medium for him to illustrate his reaction against the glaring social and economic injustices and to explore the agony, sense of fear, uncertainty,
insecurity of the Negro. He ceased to speak of integration and broadened the range of racial issues on the social and political level. A shift to a more explicit rhetoric was felt in his novels and specially his essays. His earlier optimism, reflected in his writings, was gone.

Despite the traumatic sixties, Baldwin's faith in the potential goodness of man survived. From the mid seventies there was a noticeable shift in his angle of vision. He became increasingly conscious that the cycle of hatred and more hatred was endless. Love alone could break the vicious circle of hatred. So he rejected the policy of the militants. Speaking to the white men and the black men he advocated a loving acceptance of one another. He became hopeful of racial reconciliation -- hopeful that America would certainly keep its promises. Repeatedly he said that America must change, Americans must learn to love each other without concern for race or colour.

During the transitional period when the Protest Tradition was on the decline and the Black Aesthetic Tradition was still in the womb of the future, James Baldwin, a writer of repute, descended on the stage of the literary world. Richard Wright was the founder of the Protest Tradition and Ishmael Reed was a strong votary of the Black Aesthetic Tradition. James Baldwin was sandwiched between the two antithetical traditions -- the waning Protest Tradition and the waxing Black Aesthetic Tradition.

The first impression one receives on passing from Wright to Baldwin is one of sudden change. The reader moves from writings
saturated with protest to writings in which protest is incidental or not present at all; in fact, the writings plead for integration. While Wright represented the Protest Tradition in its most vitriolic phase, Baldwin gave utterances to love in human relationships. Ishmael Reed, on the other hand, stood on the other extreme of literary thought, completely aloof from protest of any sort. He was convinced the human spirit was not imbued with racial, political and social hues, and, if the writ of the human spirit was allowed to prevail, there would be no distrust, misunderstanding or prejudice. Colour was incidental in his works, for his hero was always the universal spirit of man. Richard Wright and Ishmael Reed represent the two extremes of literary tradition in which Baldwin signifies a transitory stage between the emotional Protest Tradition and the Black Aesthetic Tradition that breathes of universality. The difference between the norms of the literary periods of the forties and the fifties can best be gauged from the quarrel Richard Wright had with James Baldwin. When Wright declared that "all literature is protest", Baldwin reacted violently with, "but all protest is not literature". The two sharply contrasting statements on the same subject may be seen as a vigorous development of contrasting values within a common culture.

Baldwin's views expressed the dictates of his individuality and he strove to write on universal themes. From Baldwin's basic truth of universality it is easier to reach Ishmael Reed who states categorically that human spirit and character are universal and the
black and white races have enough in common to justify generalisations about broad human motives and tendencies.

Being intrepidly honest, Baldwin refused to compromise or make alignments on the basis of expedience. He was the fore-runner of a period that presaged a new literary tradition in the fifties i.e. of integration. Protest in literature was ousted. Baldwin's fiction of the fifties bears witness to his consistent refusal to write protest literature. However, towards the sixties his convictions underwent a violent change from his established values and the change is increasingly evident in the writings of the sixties in which political and literary outlook is interwoven with a generous measure of protest thrown in. But the seventies heralded another change when he realised that love is the only weapon to combat the viciousness of hatred.

Baldwin is the only writer of the three writers discussed, to reach his scale of values through a strenuous route that meandered through integration, protest, integration again and finally love, which is at the apogee of all human ideals.

The first chapter gives a bird's-eye view and the second chapter forms a historical backdrop to the stage setting of the thesis. The third chapter, The Long Road -- From the Protest Tradition to the Black Aesthetic Tradition, delineates the two extremes of the literary tradition -- Protest Tradition and the Black Aesthetic Tradition, the ardent votaries of which were Richard Wright and
Ishmael Reed respectively. The fiction of James Baldwin is depicted as a transition between the protest fiction of Richard Wright and the aesthetic fiction of Ishmael Reed. Beyond Protest portrays James Baldwin, the integrationist, while Faith on Trial shows him changing his angle of vision with the changing situation in America in the sixties. The fiction of this period is coloured with protest. However, before the close of his writing career, realisation comes to him that hatred is the road which leads to destruction while love alone can redeem mankind. He pleads that love should form the basis of all human relationships. The Conclusion gives a gist of the ideologies of the three writers -- Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Ishmael Reed.