CHAPTER III

The Long Road — From the Protest Tradition to the Black Aesthetic Tradition

The trading in slaves was the cruellest and the crudest violation of an individual's personal rights. In the United States, slavery extended far back into the colonial period. The chronicle of the black people in America records not only the story of their bondage and the social discrimination they had to contend against but also their incessant and enduring endeavours to be free and to live with dignity. The Negro slave could be bought, sold, bartered, exploited, inhumanly treated and persecuted. He had no freedom and no rights and even had to have his master's permission to marry. "... crucifixion, burning and starvation were legal modes of punishment...."

Economic necessity made slavery an inevitable and necessary attribute of American life. The black man was the cheapest slave available. Consequently, he was the basic tool employed in the development of the United States of America. He contributed in terms of blood, sweat, tears and toil but was in return shamefully and savagely repressed and branded with irremedial brutal scars on his body and his psyche. His most elementary rights were violated, his physical and mental faculties were fettered, his human dignity and nature were atrociously and shockingly desecrated. The black man's history in the United States is one long tale of woe.
The twentieth century opened with protest movements gathering momentum against the rape of the black man. The black man's resentment increasingly refused to accept the savagery of the white man. The scientific and technological revolution circling the globe was fashioning new aims and a new spirit which intensified the fervour for freedom in every black man's breast. Over the years the complexion and the character of the protest movement changed drastically. At one time, in the past, the impetus behind the movement was forged by the liberal whites and the Negro upper class but progressively white participation was whittled down. The protest movement was steadily snowballing as the black working class compounded its energy and its weight behind the movement to batter down the bastions of racial discrimination, prejudice and segregation. The muted verbal protests had no effect in the past, so emphasis shifted to litigation, legislation, direct action techniques, gearing the potential of masses in industrial centres and Negro ghettos along social, political and economic lines.

The written word became a powerful instrument in the protest crusade. "Blackness" was the inspiration and it was the theme of the black writers. Through the medium of their art they sketched the black man's consciousness and his plight. They wrote of what life had spelt out to them in the form of experience, of their psyche disorganised by centuries of slavery and outrages heaped by a cruel social system. The black man was viewed as an exotic African
novelty and not as a human being. The Negro writer willingly assumed the dual role as author and spokesman of his race to put in words the cry of protest and the cry for freedom. Afro-American literature came to be symbolised as a passionate assertion and declaration of man's conscience against racism, injustice and fabricated myths in the white mind. It tried to effect changes in the entire make-up of the white man's mind regarding his black coloured brethren. With a penetrating, wide ranging social vision and deep social consciousness, the black writers jumped to the defence of their race and wrote of their needs, aspirations, sufferings and crippling conditions of life. Writing for the masses, the black writers directed their consciousness towards new goals, gave emotional expression to group feeling and urged generations of embittered and defeated men to free themselves of slavish mentality towards white ideals and abject surrender to white authority. Belligerently they emphasised race pride, self-respect, self-development and articulated a clarion call for new and meaningful leadership. As Cleaver suggested, the task was of "rejuvenating and reclaiming the shattered psyches and culture of the black people." The African writer reminded us, "we must strive to visualise the whole man, not merely the things that are meant to feather the Negroes' ego."

Subsequently, literary accounts throwing light on migration, the war, Negro race, race riots, Negro's social problems, reconstruction of Negro image became themes of Afro-American literature. The
tradition of writings advocating co-operation between the races, of duties and responsibilities of blacks towards whites, of the accommodation policy initiated by Booker T. Washington was jettisoned overboard and impassioned literature of resentment introduced by DuBois and Trotter revealed to the Negro the double-faced policy of the white majority. A series of disturbing occurrences at that time added to the growing sensitivity of the Negro — the violation of his rights, his strong determination to wrest privileges and fight prejudices, to the development of Pan-Africanism and other issues of the time like migration, race riots etc. A new phase was opening up in the post-war Negro mind.

Fiction, poetry and prose reflected the mood of the day. The year 1925 marked the Negro renaissance, the first cultural movement of the American Negro. The New Negro writer asserted his right to a separate culture with a distinctive black colouring and a history of its own. Harlem became the black cultural centre. There was no single literary philosophy to guide the group of young talented writers linked by a common black experience and stimulated by the aesthetics of the movement. A wide range of experience helped them celebrate and etch out a vignette of black life. Their political philosophy rejected assimilation, accommodation and agitation. Their African heritage was extricated from obscurity, aired with pride and revered. The writings were invested with the inner spirit of the "Blues", spirituals, folk ballads, folk tales, gospel songs etc.
Literary revolt and social revolt were juxtaposed to celebrate the vitality and beauty of "Blackness". The American Negro writer could explore his blackness, dramatise it and yet remain within the pale of American civilisation. The concept of cultural pluralism was accepted. The spirit of the Harlem Renaissance declared that the Negro was free to develop as an artist without restriction and political controversy. A sizeable list of artists who sang with exuberance of the coming of the New Negro can be drawn up easily -- Dunbar, Chestnutt, McKay, James W. Johnson, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes are some of the prominent artists who contributed towards the evolution of Afro-American literature. The exoticism of the Renaissance arts, its artists and its ideas captured in literature, unlocked the doors of prestigious publishing houses to black writers. Black fiction came into its own. However, the Harlem Renaissance was not a movement that touched the common people. It remained confined to the salons, homes of well-to-do people and the cabaret halls.

All good things come to an end and the death knell of the epoch-making Harlem Renaissance was sounded by the Depression. The special joy which "Blackness" had spelt out was effaced by unemployment, poverty, hunger, sickness and an atmosphere of general misery.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt formulated his New Deal Policy to
alleviate and ameliorate the sufferings of the people. Among other things, the New Deal created a number of Federal Writers' Workshops which gave jobs, salaries and opportunities to black American writers to produce fine literary works. The horizons of writers widened beyond their own Negro struggle to include world events and their expanding sympathy embraced other ethnic groups. The world of depression and the world at war made the black artists see race as one problem among world problems such as poverty, fascism, and appealed to all men to join hands and save the world. They formulated new techniques, new styles and new forms.

Richard Wright emerged as a writer in the middle of the Great Depression. He was a black writer who has perhaps had the greatest impact in the twentieth century.

Richard Wright was born in 1908, on a cotton plantation near Natchez, Mississippi. Mississippi State, the most racially oppressive of the states in America, was the backdrop of Richard Wright's early life. When Richard was six years old, his father, an inveterate shiftless share-cropper, forsook his family and was never heard of again. His invalid mother battled ineffectively against the odds that capricious fate had stacked against her but proved unequal to the struggle. When her strength finally gave way, she packed off her two sons to poverty-stricken relatives who did their best to shrug off the unpleasant responsibility.
Richard finally found a home with his fanatically religious grandmother and an aunt who was an enthusiastic zealot of the Seventh Day Adventist creed. Circumscribed within a straitjacket code of these two uncompromising, inflexible, harsh ladies, Richard spent the formative years of his life with religious enunciation dinned into his head day in and day out. Constraints were imposed on his movements and his mind and imagination were curbed to prevent him straying from the straight and narrow path. Cringing from the terrors that stalked his young mind, he found solace in books -- his only companions. The aching void of his imagination sought stories from the outside world and lapped up the books he could lay his hands on. The enforced hours of isolation fomented in him an aloofness that gradually developed into a "self", apart from the motley crowd that peopled the mundane world.

Except in ultimate privacy and on those rare occasions when he was at ease with his friends, when he was often gay, he had no sport with mockery, specially if it was turned against him. He had no eye for fun, no ear or tongue for jest. In public — and his books were public — he took the world and all men as he took himself with grim seriousness. 4

Denied the blessings of a loving home, domestic bliss and emotional relationships, Wright struggled through bitter and brutal humiliations that seared through his soul and branded him for a lifetime. His relatives, welded in a common front, tried to break in his rebellious nature and urged him to toe the line drawn for the
black man by white racist society. Unsuccessfully they tried to adapt him to the demeaning Jim Crow atmosphere. However, his head and heart had sponged in the violence and fear in his environment. When he stepped out of the cramped horizons of his bleak, potentially violent black world into the Southern white racist society, he discovered he had to battle for life itself. His eagerness to learn, his mechanical skill and mental faculties were a jarring challenge to the apprehensive white ego, hence, he was kicked out of jobs. It is, therefore, not surprising that the themes of violence, fear, humiliation, frustration, poverty, gnawing anger, parental neglect, deprivation, human degradation, hostile environment and black consciousness darkly pattern the plots in his fiction and prose.

Being sensitive and intelligent he was jolted into awareness of his inferior status, his "worthlessness" and his non-identity. Refusing to don the mask of the stereotyped Negro, he rejected the "place" assigned to him and refused to tread the path of servile conventional norms laid down by centuries old traditions. This brought him into deadly conflict with the white society.

His compulsion to be free of the nightmare called "life" and his desire to respond spontaneously to life prompted him to escape, at the age of eighteen, to the freedom of the 'Promised Land' i.e. the North. The first lap of his journey took him to Memphis, Tennessee. Here, his latent intellectual faculties lying dormant for
want of a formal education (due to constant moves from relative to relative) felt the stirrings of an expanding sensitivity and sensibility, prodding him into an intellectual consciousness.

The turning point in his life came when going through a local newspaper he came across a vitriolic editorial attacking H.L. Mencken. Wright's curiosity was immediately aroused and he determined to find out more of this man who could nettle the Southern whites to such an extent. He forged (pun intended) his way into the local library to get acquainted with the writings of this controversial writer. After reading *A Book of Prefaces* by this writer, he wrote of his experience,

That night in my rented room, while letting the hot water run over my can of pork and beans in the sink, I opened *A Book of Prefaces* and began to read. I was jarred and shocked by the style .... This man was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club, could words be weapons? Well, yes, for there they were. Then, may be, perhaps I could use them as weapons.

These essays awakened him to a new world of protest and a new way to protest. Mencken wrote with a contemptuous sneer — his theme was materialism, racial conflict, social protest and revolting inhumanity of the white man, which he attacked with eloquent jibes.

In 1927, Wright and his family migrated to Chicago, where for a decade he worked at menial jobs, as a porter, dishwasher, insurance salesman, medical research orderly, postal clerk etc. -- yet went
hungry at times and was put on relief. The bitter memories later scorched the pages of *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son*, *Black Boy*, and other works which he wrote subsequently.

Another renascent thought that revolutionised the perspective of his life experiences occurred when he ran through the social sciences and absorbed the concepts of secularization, urbanisation and social hierarchy. The Russian Revolution set him thinking — it was unbelievable but true that the passive peasant movement had completely transformed the feudal order into a modern industrial society in which every man found an equal place. Succumbing to the Communist appeal he thought "... that there did exist in this world an organisation searching for the truth of the lives of the oppressed and isolated ...." He was converted to the Marxist ideology. By joining the Communist Party, he believed, he could solve all the problems dogging him.

Experience taught Wright that he had been duped in joining the Communist Party. The party had no concern for the Negro and had no conception of black reality. He appraised its ideology, its aims, its methods and found it wanting. He had joined the party to etch out an identity for himself — paradoxically, he quit the party to preserve his identity. Disillusioned, he realised that the loneliness of the individual was universal and racial-political parties and social organisations were ineffective identity badges.
In 1937 Wright was appointed to the Federal Writers' Project and began contributing poetry and fiction to Left Front, Anvil and New Masses. His short stories and critical essays were published in New Challenge, The New Republic, Partisan Review etc. In 1938 he made tracks in the literary field and gained literary fame when he won the $500 prize awarded by Story Magazine for his short stories published in the book form as Uncle Tom's Children. 1939 saw him win the Guggenheim Fellowship.

In 1938 Wright left for New York where he joined the Daily Worker as Harlem editor. For ten years he endeavoured relentlessly to assuage the trauma of his heart, so that unruffled he could unravel and portray the story of his embittered soul. These were the most significant years of his life, the most prolific in literary output. He was on the way to becoming the century's most powerful literary craftsman. During this period four of his books made their appearance on the literary landscape, establishing his reputation as a skilful artist of words and themes.

Wright fell in love with a ballet dancer, Dhima Meadman but the marriage was shortlived. In 1939 he married Ellen Poplar and lived happily ever after with her.

In 1940 Native Son became an instant and extraordinary success. Voted as the "Book of the Month" it revealed how social and economic barriers lead to injustice and how environment shaped character and
personality. In 1941 he published *Twelve Million Voices* — a folk history of the American Negro. In 1945, *Black Boy*, an autobiography, made a whirl-pool splash and became a runaway success. In it, the social order and the bleakness of Negro life were drawn in lines of violence and brutality.

It was during his stay in New York that he discovered the American Dream to be an ambitious absurdity. Consequently, in 1946, he jumped at the invitation of the French Government, went to France and returned home after a six month enchanting idyll in Paris. The call of Paris could not be ignored for long, so he renounced America and its hostile atmosphere for ever and set up permanent residence in Paris. He died in France of a heart attack in 1960 at the age of fifty-two.

Wright learnt at an early age the reality of Negro life, the degradation of inferior status, the traumatic and tragic racial relations, the bitter oppression, bleak despair and angry scorn of an inhospitable environment. A consciousness whetted by superior mental faculties and sensitivities made him progressively aware that the black world was a nightmare world of white hatred and reeking of black tradition of self-abasement and brutal exploitation. In the racist society of America there was no respect or identity for the Negro; if he did not submit to the powerful will of the white man, the penalty would be severe social and legal sanctions against him. The Negro wanted one basic right — to be accepted as a human being. Malignant fate denied this basic right to him.
Wright was pained and indignant to see the Negro hiding his responses and aspirations under a servile facade to pamper the whims of the capricious white fancy. He fashioned his dreams and plans in casts assigned to him and built a "self" within an identity forced upon him. He strove through fear, shame and ignorance to find a place in the human community. The psychic wound was so deep and painful, he tried to escape through flight.

Colour has been the bane of the Negro's life. The dark colour of his skin has stripped him of every right and privilege and has distorted his personality, circumscribed his faculties and doomed him to an inferior status. Blackness is a caste system that has ostracised him from the world of man; it is a whirl-pool with a vortex of violent experiences for the Negro. The bleak, barren world of Jim Crowism leaves him faceless and spiritually lost. Psychologically he lives in a hell, cut off from the world which is not interested in knowing the kind of man trapped in the black sin. Wright was appalled.

The bitter, chilling truth came to Richard Wright quite early in life that he did not belong to the human community because his spirit was garbed in a black-coloured skin. Rage, defiance, an impotent despair and a revolutionary will prompted him to revolt against his oppressive repressions and compulsions. He recalled incidents of childhood which assumed gigantic dimensions as he comprehended their significance. Once, when in one of his confiding moods Wright spoke
of his yearning for a literary career for himself, his white employer ridiculed the preposterous idea of his carving out a place for himself in any professional field. "You will never be a great writer --- who on earth put such ideas into your head?" Saunders Redding, too, remembered, "On more than one occasion he had been treated as if he did not exist as a sensate being. As a hotel bell-boy in a Southern town he had been summoned to a room where naked women lolled about unmoved by any sense of shame because blacks were not considered human beings anyway, ... I was a non-man. Something that knew vaguely that it was human but felt it was not ... I felt doubly cast out."  

Wright decided to revolt against the injustice of white society and fight the battle of inter-racial colour and prejudice with his pen. He wanted to speak out; he wanted to compel the recognition of his personality, an affirmation of his reality. So, he became a writer to combat Negro oppression. Winging on flights of anguished rhetoric, Wright wielded his pen to wage a symbolic and implacable battle with the white society. With his pen he wanted to hew out the story of the American Negro whose tragic sorrow might smite the conscience of humanity. At times he made impassioned pleas to express the great social crime Americans had perpetrated against the black masses and the effect of that crime on the life and person of the Negro. Social and economic barriers led to grave injustice. Wright hated the apathetic, humble black man who accepted his tragic and inhuman plight
in complete surrender. He wanted to provoke a reaction that would incite the black man to question, "Is this us? Is this our America?"

Richard Wright was a man with a message and a mission — he would portray Negro life and would become the interpreter of his race, he vowed.

Richard Wright was the first Negro novelist who emerged on the literary scene as a major spokesman for the oppressed Negro race to grapple tenaciously with the grand theme of Negro struggle and Negro aspirations. He determined to dedicate his writing skill to the Negro cause. In a defiant mood he translated the harrowing truth of the Negro's long experience of segregation and deprivation into an authentic, heart-rending, emotional epic. He depicted sensitively the lurking violent forces which generated a vitiated atmosphere against which the Negro was powerless. Richard Wright became identified with the Negro struggle for self-identification.

Wright wanted to redefine "Blackness" and give it a new dimension. It would no longer be a condition of segregation or an epitome of the plantation tradition or a symbol of the dark African continent. It stood for the negation of Negro life, for the philosophy of "nothingness", for "speechlessness". Blackness gave rise to prejudices that warped and encrusted it with all the oppressive qualities. It was the creation of the sick mind of contemporary civilisation. He would show the world that "Blackness" was a metaphysical state -- he would interpret it for the ignorant white masses.
The next momentous decision was to write for a white audience, for the black man was already well acquainted with the tragic story of his race. In "Blue Print for Negro Writing" Wright defined the role of a writer. The black writer should write to dispel the white man's myopic and distorted beliefs. Black literature should use the black tradition and culture to explain the psychology and the trauma of the black man to the world at large.

He reasoned that Negro already knew what it was to have uncertainty as a way of life and of living within. The vivid present moment and telling the meaning of the moment ..... But whites did not know, so he had to tell them -- in the rage of Silas (in "Long Black Song") in the weakness of Mann (in "Down by the Riverside") in the despair of Bigger (in Native Son)12.

Wright had in ample measure two qualities necessary in a writer -- detachment and curiosity. Self-centered, he always stood apart from fellow human beings but being curious he viewed every thing with intense perception. It was this curiosity that led him to explore the question of colour and human relationships based on it. His mother was constantly reprimanding him, "Will you stop asking silly questions?"13

Wright's strident writings, imbued with racial feeling and inner revolt, are referred to as protest literature. Spewing hatred and indignation and accusatory in nature, they draw a sharp line of conflict and call attention to social aspects of social, economic and
political injustices. The hypocrisies and fallacies are interwoven with the excruciating pain of the Negro to present a pageant of Negro life. While exploring Negro life he unravels the myths of democracy and sickness corroding the vitals of the so called civilised American society. Every black man for Wright "... is experiencing the self same irony. He is measuring his non-life or some portion of it, against his tantalising vision of what he supposes that life would be in an America free of colour and caste."  

His theme was the pathos of the black man but the central issue was always protest and in writing, his aim was, as he confessed, "to tear the living hearts out of his gasping readers --not even allowing them the consolation of tears." His anguish can be gauged from the fact that four of his epigraphs are borrowed from the book of Job. The vignettes of Negro life, Wright draws in his novels, are his own traumatic experiences, a reflection of his own life.

With a racy, pungent pugnacity, Wright delineated the character and psychology of his heroes who were not imaginary figments of a frenzied imagination. They were bitter, vengeful, the dispossessed and the dispossessed, the hunted men, the furious men, insulted, uprooted and lost. They were common men from the lower class driven to extremities of violence who were faced with a grim dilemma — to take flight or to achieve martyrdom.
The hero is a common man who is made to suffer because he has got in touch with reality because his awakened potentialities have brought him into conflict with the forces of reaction. His suffering consequently, though it is physical as well as mental, is accompanied by an inner state of feeling which is the opposite of submission, one of active, exalted conviction of self-fulfilment.

Wright wrote in the picaresque tradition as that tradition gave greater freedom to adapt the subject matter to the needs of the black writer. The picaresque hero was constantly threatened with spiritual death. He was usually ostracised, so he started on a symbolic journey to search for freedom and for his roots. As the story of his adventures unfolded, his spirit of endurance was stretched to breaking point. To survive, he succumbed to the difficult situation and became a criminal and an outlaw. The grim, vivid portraits of Negro youth that Wright sketched were those of picaresque heroes, who in the course of their adventures, underwent an inner revolution and resolution. They preferred death to degradation and wrestled with the social order with defiant hostility. They were ready to pay any price for the satisfaction of living according to their ever-expanding convictions of self-fulfilment. They desecrated the sanctity of conventions, violated law without compunction. Ultimately, they were sacrificed for their iconoclastic tendencies. Knowing what fate held in store for them, they felt incited to contravene social conventions.

Encumbered with a dual personality, the hero created an
imaginary world with a landscape dotted with various scenarios in which he pulled the strings and was master of the situation. Pursuit of identity and individuality made him act impulsively; very often his actions were beyond his conscious control. The hero journeyed towards situations which spelt unrestricted freedom, away from the social restrictions. The black violence was essentially a reaction set in motion by white perversity. The creative impulse, smothered in the black youth, found an outlet in anti-social activities. Bigger Thomas resented,

"We Blacks and they Whites. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeking in through a knot-hole in the fence."  

The period of 1940's was undeniably the period of Richard Wright. The historic disinheritance and the sense of wretchedness of a whole race of people so disenchanted him that he took up his pen to give articulation to the social tragedy of a people locked in non-stop struggle for survival in the country of their birth. Seized with an emotional rage, he wove the fabric of his stories and denounced the humiliations, the poverty and the violation of the human rights spirit by the American society.

Wright worked as a Communist party activist from 1932 to 1944. As a party worker, he acquired a number of journalistic and editorial skills. His party contacts were a source of material for his first
book. In the South Side Unit, which was assigned to him, Wright met a Negro Communist whose early life in Mississippi inspired him to attempt a series of novellas. All around, Wright saw the material which he could mould into miniatures of Negro life. Those real life stories of grim vividness, spelling out the ethics of Negro panorama, won him the first prize in a competition open only to the WPA writers. The collection of five novellas was published under the title *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) and was awarded five hundred dollars prize by *Story Magazine*. In 1939, "Bright and Morning Star" was selected as one of the two best stories published in 1939 and one of the fifty best stories published since 1915. The quintessence of these stories was cradled in the picaresque tradition and depicted to a great extent the agony of the persecuted state; violence was a weapon used to goad the Negro within the limits of his rigidly defined place. The central theme communicated the pain of the Negroes, bemoaned their lot, their frustrations, their deprivations and their festering resentment. The locale was the South. Each story was woven around a social or a moral wrong -- the wrongs which were sanctioned by the Southern laws. The dispossessed and the disinheritied characters were incited to rebel violently against the unequal and unjust social ideas. The heroes adopted the outlaw code and either died martyrs or took flight to freedom -- if they succeeded in escaping mutilation or death. In each story the hero suffered but there was hope, that out of suffering would arise a race of men
who would successfully confront their destiny and would wrest freedom from fear and lead a life of dignity. At every step brutal violence showed the Negro his "place" and forced him to keep it. The mob went on a rampage in four out of the five stories and in three stories the hunted heroes hurled into the jaws of violent death. Uncle Tom's Children is a book of hatreds. Mr. Wright served notice by his title that he spoke of people in revolt, and his stories are so grim that the Dismal Swamp of race hatred must be where they lived. Not one act of understanding or sympathy came to pass in the entire work ... what was new in the four novellettes included in Mr. Wright's book is the wish fulfilment theme. In each story the hero suffered but he gets his man.

In "Big Boy Leaves Home" is told the tragic story of a young, happy, carefree youngster frolicking in the water with his gang of five. All the boys were in the nude. A white woman, on seeing them, screamed hysterically. Her white companion, prompted by a sense of misguided chivalry, raised his gun without any provocation and gunned down two of the gang. Big Boy wrestled for the gun and accidentally killed the man. Big Boy and his companion fled but the companion was captured by the pursuing mob and horribly mutilated and then murdered. Big Boy fled northwards because he had broken a definite social convention in the South that enjoined on the Negro never to raise his hand against a white man. The hero did not will the situation or the circumstances. Tragedy loomed out of a trivial
incident -- Big Boy became a victim of white suppression and brutal hatred which cramped the Negro's enslaved mind. In 1930, when the story first appeared, each Negro read between the lines his own experience of being trapped in a black skin.

"Down by the Riverside" illustrates the tremendous pressure on the black man in a white-black conflict. When the story began flood waters were lapping at the threshold of Mann's cabin. Mann was determined to take his pregnant wife to the doctor and also to evacuate his family to the hills. To carry out his resolution he borrowed a boat from his friend, Bob, and embarked upon his mission. Unable to fight the swirling current, he stopped at the cabin of a white man to request help. Unfortunately, malicious fate took him to the very door of the man from whom the boat was stolen by Bob. Recognising the boat, the white man forgot the Christian virtues of charity and service to fellow human beings and stubbornly demanded the return of his boat. Mann had no alternative but to kill him. Though he knew fully well the consequences of his action, Mann did not flee. At great risk to his life he continued to rescue people trapped by the floods. Ultimately, the soldiers hounded him out; he died at their hands and escaped ignoble death which the mob had in store for him.

The long story detailed a number of events which the long suffering Negro had to live through to bring succour to his ailing
wife. The lesson was very clear. He who revolted against white
convention would always fight a losing battle — he would also die.
The story also made a mockery of the Christian virtues the white
man professed but did not practise. The Negro acted as the Good
Samaritan and exercised human and moral virtues beyond the call of
religious injunctions.

"Long Black Song" was a story of racial protest. The first part
of the story created the circumstances and situations in which Sarah,
a young Negro wife, succumbed to the charms of a white salesman
selling phonograms. She violated black convention by voluntarily
giving in to the white man. Her husband, Silas, made his appearance
in the second part and was forced to respond to the circumstances
and the situation. On discovering the betrayal, he horse-whipped
the wife and killed the salesman. Silas broke a social convention,
too — he killed a white man. Silas had worked ten long years to
own the farmstead he lived on. He had envisioned a number of
dreams which lay shattered around him. Fortified with a strong will,
he awaited with a loaded gun the lynching mob, he knew would come,
screaming for his blood. He preferred to die a violent death in his
house, for he felt it would affirm his assertion of masculinity. Death
would bring him dignity which had eluded him throughout life.
However, he bemoaned, "Mah own blood" had stabbed him in the back.
The so-called "civilised society" stewed the Negro in fearful,
paralysing suffering. A story which clearly indicted the "civilisation."
"Fire and Cloud" was a revolt against the corrupt and selfish politician who tried to frighten Negroes into political indifference by maliciously perpetrating injustice and cruelty against them. The Communist movement which promised a casteless and colourless society was depicted in graphic outline.

When Dan Zaylor, a Negro preacher, was viciously beaten by the whites, he was converted to the Marxian philosophy. He realised bitterly that politicians exploited the poor whites and the blacks. He persuaded them to join hands and march upon a Southern town to emphasize their rights. At first it was the religious impulse which impelled him recklessly onwards but finally it transcended to the Communist theory of brotherhood, which spurred him on to manifest his strong will. His altruistic motives sounded his death knell. The usual standards of truth and altruistic motives were ignored when the Negro held the centre of the stage. The white policy was to ostracise and persecute the black man who practised the injunctions of the white society — practice of these injunctions brought honour and prestige only to the white man and death to the black man who was presumptuous enough to imitate the white man.

"Bright Morning Star" explored the psychological upheaval of Ann Sue, the mother of a Communist. She herself was not a votary of the Marxian theory but her son Johnny Boy was a Communist activist. She had an instinctive distrust of white comrades. She
was immediately suspicious when Booker, a poor white Communist, an infiltrator, came to her and professed confidence in her. He tricked her into giving him the names of the other comrades. Her maternal instinct took her to the scene where her Johnny Boy was caught by the mob. Symbolically, she wrapped around herself a winding sheet "like a nigga woman" and took with her a gun. She steeled herself into witnessing her son's maiming. As she saw Booker edging forward to inform against the group, she killed him. She and her son were killed, defiantly asserting their revolutionary will which ultimately gave shape to the meaning of their lives. Like other characters created by Wright in his books, Ann Sue and her son Johnny Boy achieved dignity in death -- life for them had spelt "nothingness" and "facelessness".

In 1940, Native Son made a sensational appearance and launched Wright on a literary career establishing his popularity and his reputation. The book was a bestseller and a "Book of the Month" selection. Orson Welles adapted it for the stage and Wright himself worked out its story for the cinema. The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People awarded it the Spingarm Medal. Native Son can easily be counted among the major American novels.

Native Son was an effective and artistic twentieth century American statement of the brutality, dehumanising, predominantly hostile environment in which the Negroes lived. Wright indicted
the American people and succeeded in giving a jolt to the National Conscience. Into the pattern of the picaresque tradition were woven the motifs of the American closed society, naturalism, Marxism, Negro folk-lore, loss of religious faith, emphasis on violence, defiant death as affirmation of deliverance etc. The hero not only fled from the oppressive social order of the South to the freedom of the North but journeyed symbolically to a spiritual and moral destination. In "How Bigger was Born" Wright tells us,

I found that I had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if ever I wrote another book no one would weep over it, and it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears.19

The hero, Bigger Thomas, twenty year old Southern black migrant, with an eighth grade education, lived in urban nihilism. The social and economic injustices had so perverted his personality that the tragedy of the Native Son was born. It was the tragedy of both the black men and the white men -- liberals like Dalton and Jan were all caught up in the cataclysm, for they were too myopic to comprehend the psychological plight of Bigger and other millions of deprived blacks who groped unsuccessfully for satisfying relationships throughout life. He was symbolic of the "cornered rat" with which the story of Native Son began. Just as the rat, Bigger, too, was cornered by society and by fear. Ultimately, he killed the rat -- he, too, met a violent and unnatural death.
Bred in the slums, alienated from moral values, prevented by a skin-deep colour from joining the professions they aspired for, the Negroes lived in a world of make-believe in which Bigger and his friends assumed the roles of generals, magnates and government officials to counteract the nothingness of their existence. His name, too, was symbolic of his aspirations. He resented, "We blacks and they white. They get things and we ain't. They do things and we can't." 20

Bigger wanted a bigger canvas to display his artistic faculties; he wanted a wider latitude and more opportunities to revel on an epic plane. He sought challenges worthy of his yearnings but unfortunately, he could assert and affirm his existence only through violence and crime. Though his crime gave him a new sense of identity, a new purpose, a new freedom, a new conviction of his own power and visibility, we can discern beneath the bravado of defiance, a craving for affection and recognition. Lurking round every corner, he caught sight of glimpses of a deeper vision of reality.

With a prophetic vision, Wright warned us that Bigger was the fore-runner of the Black Panther, Black Muslim and other militant groups that were in the process of making amongst the oppressed masses of America. Bigger was

---- the danger signal of a more bitter time to come, when not Bigger alone, but all his kindred will rise, in the name of many thousands who have proceeded in fire and blood and by rope and torture to demand their rightful vengeance. 21
Book one gives a vivid representation of American closed society in the North. We get introduced to Bigger Thomas who had been engaged by Mr. John Dalton as a chauffeur. One day Bigger brought home Mary Dalton, his wealthy employer's daughter. She was too intoxicated to walk to her room, so he picked her up and deposited her on to her bed in her bedroom. Just as he was settling her, Mrs. Dalton, the blind wife of Mr. Dalton, came to her daughter's room. Apprehensive that his presence in the room might arouse her worst suspicions, he kept quiet. He smothered Mary's face with a pillow to prevent her from responding to her mother's enquiries. After Mrs. Dalton left the room, Bigger discovered to his horror that he had smothered Mary to death. To obliterate all traces of the body he burnt it in the furnace. Paradoxically, the murder was accidental -- it could well have been intentional, for Bigger hated the white people. Bigger's identity began to take shape only after the murder and the white man began to acknowledge him as an individual.

A series of pathetic scenes in Book two develop Bigger in the role of an outlaw hero. Accompanied by his Negro girlfriend, to whom he had confessed his crime, he dodged the law and made a bid for escape. Crazed by the dread of being apprehended and suspicious of being betrayed by his girlfriend, who he thought would squeal the truth when pressed by the police, he battered her brains out while she was sleeping. Eventually he was arrested.
By the time we are sufficiently acquainted with Bigger Thomas, we do not like him and we do not sympathise with him. However, we cannot help putting the onus on the circumstances which impelled him along a particular line of action. Bigger comes out in the story a rather stupid boy, lacking heroic qualities. He did not get along with his family or his friends. Bigger did not cater to the black culture ideology which typified escapism, "facelessness", abject surrender of rights and the negative qualities of existence which had penetrated insidiously into the black culture. He rebelled against the white culture which symbolised power and freedom. He was pressurised by his family into accepting the job Mr. Dalton offered. He then killed the daughter of his benefactor and disposed of her body in a gruesome manner.

The murder trial of Bigger takes up one third of the novel. At the trial it was discovered that Mr. Dalton was a philanthropist who had donated large sums to Negro charity. He owned South Side Real Estate Company in Chicago, a group of rat-infested, gloomy tenements. When cross-examined as to why he charged such exorbitant rent, he smilingly replied that he considered it unethical to undersell his competitors. He further elaborated that the rent of Negro tenements was higher than that for whites because there was shortage of Negro accommodation. To another question he responded that he had never engaged any Negro he had patronised through his
charities in his business empire. Through cross-examination Dalton was exposed as a myopic liberal who had not understood the yearnings of the Negro for opportunity. Selfish designs had prevented him from providing decent habitation for the Negro. If John Dalton had invested in housing schemes, recreational centres and provided equal opportunities to Negroes, a monstrosity like Bigger would not have been born. Disastrous circumstances and adverse situations in their unholy alliance had created Bigger and many like him. If Dalton had tried to bridge the divide between the black and white, his daughter would have been alive -- Bigger would not have taken her life if he had had a free will to choose his line of action. The Defence Attorney charged Dalton of murdering his own daughter; his short sightedness had helped nurture perverse characters like Bigger, he declared.

Book Three endeavours to put the values in their proper perspective. The death sentence was pronounced and Bigger went to the electric chair desperately groping for a creed, a conviction, an ideology that would divulge to him the secret of life and death. Traditional religious values had proved to be frail anchors; he abjured them. Then an old preacher came for the last confession and the last Christian rites. Jan Erlone, a young Communist, and his lawyer, next visited him. They glorified the Communist religion which advocated a human fraternity from which none was excluded but Bigger refused to be taken in -- everything, so far, had proved illusory. He had to evolve his own answers to the questions that
niggled him. Bigger succeeded in acquiring a partial affirmation of his identity, established his visibility through murder but forfeited the right to live in the human community. He died repeating, "What I killed for, I am".²²

In 1941, R. Wright published his third book *Twelve Million Voices*. It was a folk history of the American Negro—a useful and concise summary of Negro folk experiences.

*The Man Who Lived Underground* (1942) was an excellent piece of fiction toying with a number of themes—fear, brutality, violence, futility of the Christian religion, non-identity etc. Sustaining all these themes was the absurdity of the modern world and the absurdities of Negro life—all invoked to depict a variation of nihilism. The book explored the innermost recesses of the black man's heart and the meretricious ornamentation of white culture.

Expressed in the book is an offshoot of Wright's own experience. During the winter of 1932, working as a caretaker of experimental animals kept in the basement of the hospital, Wright was confined to the underground environment, cut away from the rest of the hospital. His sensitivity drew a parallel between his life and that of the Negro race, distanced psychologically from the rest of America for three hundred years. Racial segregationists had ostracized him and forced him to live underground. The Negro race,
steeped in ignorance, was a victim of emotional rejection, metaphysical annihilation, divorced from humanity and reduced to philosophic "nothingness". Consequently, he turned morbid and brooded on avenging the wrongs.

The protagonist, a Negro, was arrested on a trumped-up murder charge. The accused gave the slip to the police by dodging down a manhole into a sewer -- place for the rejected filth and a symbol of revulsion and disgust, it aptly defined Negro life. He sought refuge in a dry grotto. Away from society he was free of the conventions circumscribing society, unfettered by social norms and values. Soon he forgot his name -- the last vestige of social recognition. He appropriated large sums of money from a bank vault and papered the walls of his grotto with the notes. He burgled a jewellery store and studded precious stones and jewellery items all round. He stole a typewriter, a gun, a cartridge belt and a meat cleaver and adorned his living place. The social symbols of wealth had no meaning for the man who lived underground. At the same time his criminal actions gave meaning to his existence. The white man would sit up and give shape to his "being"! On hearing voices he looked through a hole and saw the interior of a church where the Sunday Service was in progress. He realised that people gathered there were all hypocrites, performing meaningless sanctimonious rituals. In the sewer he came across a tiny nude Negro baby, a desperate mother's repudiation; it was also emblematic of the Negro as an unwanted child.
The child was the potential father of the man and was nipped in the bud. In another incident the fugitive peeped into an undertaker's establishment and saw a supine figure on a white table above which was suspended a glass container containing some blackish red liquid -- he interpreted it as the draining of the black man's life-blood, turning him into "nothingness".

Everything, from the white man's expressions to his rituals, was absurd -- his prescribed values were a combination of jewellery store, butcher shop, bank vault. The protagonist made his cave a mockery of the white cultural system. "fred daniels" was free in the cave. When he came out of the sewer, he was taken for a sewer workman and ignored by the police. He entered the church but was thrown out. When he went to the police station to show them "he is", he discovered the police had cleared him of the murder charge. When he told them of his underground home they pretended to believe his mad tale. They accompanied him to the manhole and shot him in cold blood -- the ritual of murder performed again and again is symbolic of the American system. The object was not obliteration of the Negro but of the Negro's essential identity.

In 1945, Black Boy created ripples of sensation that spread in ever-widening circles. The sale graph climbed sharply upwards, higher than that of the Native Son. With pen dipped in bitter violence, he tore asunder the deceptive camouflage of Negro life and
made startling revelations of the black man's "self". Exposing the racial situation, the hypocrisy behind the facade of American democracy, the basic issues of identity, terror tactics of the whites, cruelty, murder and manipulation of the Negro, the book attempted to awaken the slumbering moral and social conscience of the white American.

Black Boy was an American classic. Though Wright told the story of his own youth, thousands of black Americans read in it the course of their own fortunes. Written in a trenchantly militant style, it evoked echoes of the Fred Douglass slave narrative.

Now this is the story of a coloured boy who just yesterday found in his native community not merely that he was penalized for having the same qualities of courage, energy, curiosity, refusal to be subservient, the impulse to record life in words -- but that he was in danger of disapproval, then of beatings, then of being killed, for these qualities, for being 'uppity'.

How much fear was generated in the white breast by the publication of the book can be gauged from a speech delivered by a Senator in the Senate.

It is the dirtiest, filthiest, lousiest, most obscene piece of writing that I have seen in print. I would hate to have a son or daughter of mine be permitted to read it, it is so filthy and so dirty. But it comes from a Negro, and you cannot expect any better from a person of this type.
The book was a great social document, a denouement of the double set of values practised by the white race to debase and demean the Negro who struggled against unbelievable odds to affirm his inalienable rights as a man. The locale was the South.

The story began with the theme of gradual awakening of Black Boy's consciousness towards his own identity despite the rigidly defined range of his activity. He nurtured his aspirations in secret, for experience had taught him to suppress his responses and yearnings towards individuality.

Having learnt through experience that the whole group is punished for the actions of the single member, it has worked out efficient techniques of behaviour control .... Within the ambit of the black family this takes the form of training the child away from curiosity and adventure, against reaching out for those activities lying beyond the borders of the black community. And when the child resists, the parent discourages him, first within the formula 'That there's for white folks. Colored can't have it,' and finally with a beating.26

The essential cruelty of communal violence, the prevailing ugliness and futility had serious repercussions in Black Boy's life but he was not ready to concede to the white man's superiority or to allow him to dwarf his mentality or to measure himself down to the white man's prescribed size.

The second theme running through the story recorded the struggle which the disinherited race put up to reclaim its lost
heritage. The Negro stood silhouetted against a background of barrenness, deprived of the colourful emotions of joy and love. The agonising episodes of his life reflected home life, place of work, and general everyday experiences that spoke of hostile environmental forces. He derived inspiration from the literature of protest and revolt and from the Marxian doctrine. The young crusader of Negro Rights wished to combat the entire white society which had geared all its brutal power to keep the Negro in his place, to damn him and to discourage the slightest spark of ambition. He wanted to give lie to the white man's definition of blacks.

Through *Black Boy*, Wright rejected the subordinate place assigned to him in society which attempted to stifle him and barricade him in too many "don'ts". Ringed by social taboos, he was denied the fulfilment of his basic desires. The more the restraints imposed on him were, the more he endeavoured to push back the artificial boundaries. He wished to transgress, to trespass, to taste the forbidden fruit and to liberate himself. Towards the end of the book his spirit was triumphant,

I was building up in me a dream which the entire educational system had been rigged to stifle, I was feeling the very thing that the State of Mississippi had spent millions of dollars to make sure I would never feel ... I was beginning to dream the dreams that the State had said were wrong, that the schools had said were taboo.27
In the summer of 1947, Wright emigrated to France and stayed there till his death in 1960. At that time he was passing through a political and spiritual crisis which he resolved by taking a new interest in the affairs of the Third World. He became interested in existentialism and acquired a new individuality, that is, of an outsider. His political commentary and interpretations of that period were compiled in four books of non-fiction: *Black Power* (1954), *The Color Curtain* (1956), *Pagan Spain* (1957) and *White Man, Listen* (1957). The books were a blend of travel, journalistic expertise with historical and political comments peppering the whole exposition.

He travelled in Africa and Asia. Everywhere he went, he saw despairing humanity struggling in a morass of oppression, poverty and suffering from curbs and restrictions of traditional societies. His political heroes were westernised elite of Africa and Asia, "lonely outsiders who exist precariously on the margins of many cultures." All around in the modern progressive world forces of science, technology and logic were repudiating the scourge of the feudal past and irrationality of Christian medieval culture. Wright ventured to bring about the emancipation of white thought. He had great expectations of Nehru, Nikrumah, Nasser and Sukarno -- the four great leaders in Asia and Africa, though he knew their unremitting war against unbelievably heavy odds would not be easy.
The literature of Wright's French period consisted of three novels: The Outsider\textsuperscript{32} (1952), Savage holiday\textsuperscript{33} (1954), The Long Dream\textsuperscript{34} (1958) and a collection of short stories, Eight Men\textsuperscript{35} (1961).

In The Outsider Wright discarded traditional characters and hewed a hero out of modern, industrial and post-Christian man, that is, the contemporary man, who believed in the doctrine of existentialism, was amoral, rootless and answerable to no God or ethics and forming his own laws. Though the book can be called a Negro novel, it cannot be classified under racial literature. Ironically named Cross Damon, the protagonist went on a killing spree to satisfy a base desire within him for absolute freedom. He wondered, "What is Man?" and answered in the spirit of contemporary man, "Man is nothing in particular." The theme of nihilism pushing man towards a new brutalism pervades the book which may be interpreted as Wright's spiritual journey. Books one and two are concerned with Wright's identity as a Negro, books three and four with his identity as a Communist, book five shows him as a lonely, disillusioned 'outsider' trapped at the cosmic and cultural cross-currents.

Lonely, puzzled but constantly brooding, warm-hearted but impelled into savage hostilities, the hero lives and dies as a rebel against traditional morality, against social distinctions, against friendship and love, against organized love and organized rebellion and against religion.\textsuperscript{36}

Cross Damon, an intelligent black man, working as a postal clerk
was desperately trying to escape the dull office routine, his estranged family and young pregnant mistress. He thought it was the hand of fate intervening when he met with an accident and decided "to die". He buried his past and forgot his obligations. Thereafter, he surfaced in the white world and redefined his identity. He killed three men and was isolated from the world by his criminality. He found only two props in life, a woman, Eva Blount, whom he loved (whose husband he had killed) and the district attorney, Ely Houston, but both abandoned him on discovering his crimes. Finally, Cross Damon was killed by a hired gunman of the Communist Party. Cross Damon represented the modern man with a Faustian urge to become God. The penalty was eternal damnation. Eva and Houston are symbolic of love and trust, restraint and humility. Damon's association with them could have led to his salvation.

*Savage Holiday* (1954) was a desperate but futile bid by Wright to make his presence felt in the world of letters. He returned to the Mississippi of his youth but the touch of the master craftsman was missing, for he had no direct experience of his material while staying in Paris. The book had no Negro character and a reading of it gave one the impression that it was written for the pulp market. However, Wright's penchant for allegory made itself felt.

*The Long Dream* (1958) was the last novel published by Wright and the best written in exile. Again, Wright made a vain bid to
portray Mississippi as he knew it but he had been away for so long that he was unaware of the dramatic changes that had taken place in his absence -- the work was an anachronism. It was a re-hash of *Black Boy*. It painted in lurid colours the harsh, dirty world of the South which was a surrealistic nightmare for the Negro who wanted to live with dignity.

*Lawd Today* 37 (1963) was probably written in 1935-37 but published posthumously. The Negro militancy was at its height during that period and the militants felt it did little to advance the Negro's cause. The others did not quite welcome it, for they felt it was the last out-burst of the "proletariat voices" in which interest had evaporated. The book advocated rejection of the western culture.

*Eight Men* (1961). Out of the eight stories compiled in this book six had appeared in print under slightly different titles. The stories showed a persistent experimentation in finding means to put across his one message -- the varied ways in which the white world had alienated and emasculated the Negro.

"The Man Who Killed a Shadow" is the tragic story of Saul Saunders who worked in a cathedral. A white woman working there tried to seduce him but not knowing the ways of the white world he resisted. Offended, the lady screamed her head off. Ignorant and innocent of the white woman's intentions, Saunders killed her in
confusion. The tragedy took place because Saunders lived in a black world separated from the white world by millions of psychological miles.

"Man of All Work" treated symbolically the emasculation of the black male by the American society. The story is of a Negro, who because of his wife's illness, tried to hold down her job by dressing as a female domestic. The white mistress had never "seen" the Negro maid, so the charade went on till the curtain was finally pulled down.

"The Man Who Saw the Flood" concerned a Negro trapped in the share-cropping system. Nature and the system joined hands in oppressing the Negro.

"Man. God Ain't Like That" is a far-fetched account of an African in Paris who began to look upon his white master as a God, then killed him to bring about his resurrection.

"Big Black Good Man" tried to reveal how little the white world understood the black man.

"The Man Who Went to Chicago" was an autobiographical account in which the author explored the various facets of racism found in the North — though they lacked the violence of the South, they were just as degrading and dehumanising.

Before 1940's the writings of black authors depicted the
Negroes as defeated, rejected, humiliated victims of violence and white racism. They were shown struggling in the physical world of their environment and psychologically contending with the terrors of the mind. The literature was indignant, accusatory and denounced the brutalities against the human spirit, in short, the literature raged at the ways of American life. However, from the forties to the sixties a number of political and social forces heaved the old themes out. The creative writers were prompted by new motivations, viewpoints, new modifications, and new character types, which radically changed the concept of Negro literature. The vituperative writing was still concerned with injustice perpetrated against the blacks but the writing was less frenzied and more rational. The Declaration of Human Rights seemed to have assured them to some extent. The old Negro stereotypes were ousted. The newly defined black characters were dignified and they made an effort to give direction to their destinies.

At times, the Negro writers made attempts to assimilate themselves in the conglomeration of the American society but discovered gradually that assimilation was not only impossible but undesirable -- moving towards the mainstream of American literature would not pay in the long run.

The integration movement had been at work long before 1954 but the Supreme Court verdict in favour of the Negro had morally
committed the nation into giving him more freedom and equality. A new impetus was given to the social changes, thus ushering in a new era of integration. The Civil Rights Movement was also gaining momentum. The fast moving political changes, the social revolution in America, the changing status of the Negroes and the emerging nations in Africa and Asia, all these were reflected in the literary sphere. The creative abilities of the Negro writers were forged together in a common front to combat the common enemy to further the common aim and speak out in one voice the bitter anger of a whole race. The writers abandoned their themes of protest. The experienced writers of the forties found the change disturbing, for they had honed their skill in churning out protest literature in the cherished tradition of the past.

The search for new themes began. The black artists played down the racial themes, abandoned the Negro and Negro background. They decided that colour of the skin would not doom a man to an inferior status.

A multiplicity of themes with diverse subjects made their appearance. One theme, quite popular, dealt with the miscellaneous problems of the young people. Another theme picked up by authors concerned family history ventilating domestic disaster — marital strife, racial prejudice and child problems that dog family life.

In the middle of the sixties autobiographies and semi-autobio-
graphical novels appeared on the literary scene. In the novels racial conflict was expressed through sex rather than love. Then novels touching on housing, education, war, regional life and historical truths were the subjects of some of the writers. Negro writers began to knit their themes around white characters.

The Supreme Court had given its verdict in favour of integration. The nation was committed to honour the verdict but the white people were not ready for a drastic change in racial climate. Very often laws are passed in advance of social opinion which take some time to adapt themselves to the social sentiments. Old prejudices die hard. After some time the ancient social creed and traditional values become mechanical, stereotyped, rigid and a matter of formal practice and begin to foster social abuses. Legislation cannot bring about radical changes unless society becomes more open-minded, re-defines its concepts and lends support. The Negro writers' hopes of lifting racial barriers received a rude shock when the basic principles of white American society remained unchanged. The moral conscience of America continued to slumber in spite of the Court's decisions and there was no clearly defined change in American principles. The integration movement was a charade. The overwhelming majority of white Americans was still steeped in race snobbery. The experience was tragic; the new vision of America continued to be blurred. Momentous decisions of the courts came to nought and the colour line continued to be the demarcating line between the two races.
Before the integration movement could take the black writers towards mainstream literature, it began to flounder. It received a setback from the Civil Rights revolution, specially from the black nationalist segment. Even those writers who wrote on themes of integration shifted their inclinations towards the camp of black nationalists. Margaret Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks were prototypes of the changing pattern in literary trends.

The black nationalist programme became very popular and its influence whorled out far and wide. New themes and new pastures were created and encompassed in the black literary art. The black authors adopted a new stance, critical of the middle class culture which embodied the middle class standards of American society. James Baldwin, too, joined in launching a scathing and contemptuous attack in "Letter to My Nephew" in The Fire Next Time\(^\text{38}\) (1963).

"Black is beautiful" was the clamorous and glamorous slogan of the day. A new breed of militant black writers picked up cudgels on behalf of their people. They lost interest in the integration movement. They repudiated the American literary mainstream and resolved to give a new direction to their literature which would, henceforth, be written for the blacks and by the blacks. A new black literary tradition would explore the full range of Negro life and Negro mind, hitherto untouched. The past interpretations arrived at by the prejudiced white racists would be jettisoned and new
foundations of literature would be laid. Henceforth, they would dig in their heels and fight tooth and nail for their rights. They would combine their resources and wrest respect from society. In future, there would be no love and compassion in their interaction with the white people.

The Black Revolt influenced the revival of the Protest Tradition — the tradition became more inimical. Side by side with the new militant spirit, it ran for sometime before petering out. The Protest Tradition viewed the whites with pity and contempt and a sadistic kind of love-hatred, clearly evident in Baldwin's *Another Country*[^39]. LeRoi Jones and other black writers picked up the theme of black man falling in love with a white woman and the resultant frustration and non-fulfilment. The relationship was unsatisfactory and dissatisfying. Another theme of the period which gained a measure of popularity was the depiction of the ghetto kid on whom was unleashed police brutality. He had to fight against all the evils that the Negro has had to fight with from the time he first set foot on American soil.

During this transitional period when the Protest Tradition was on the wane and the Black Aesthetic Tradition was yet to grip a foothold in the black literary world, James Baldwin, a writer, who was to win repute as a man of letters, emerged on the literary scene.

James Baldwin was born on 2 August 1924 in Harlem, New York
City, in a world of vicious circumstances that cruelly conspired to 
trap him in a black skin, erase his identity and isolate him from 
human interaction; his early life was a desperate struggle to justify 
his existence. All around him was the stench of liquor, drugs, sex 
and crime. He was a product of the Great Migration. His father 
had come North from New Orleans and his mother from Maryland. David 
Baldwin, his step-father, the only father he knew, and the only man 
Baldwin ever hated, was an evangelical preacher who resented the 
three-year old illegitimate son, James, his wife had brought along 
with her dowry. David Baldwin was a hate-mongering, fanatically 
religious man who perpetrated a perpetual nightmarish experience for 
Baldwin.

Baldwin's early life revolved to a great extent around this 
man who was Gabriel Grimes of Go Tell It on the Mountain\(^{40}\) and the 
man whom we came to know better through Notes of a Native Son.\(^{41}\) 
A maturer Baldwin speaking of him in an interview in 1976 said,"He had 
nine children he could hardly feed. His pain was so great that he 
translated himself into silence, rigidity ... sometimes into beating 
us and finally into madness."\(^{42}\)

His mother, Emma Berdis, was "a very tough woman"\(^{43}\) and at the 
same time gentle and sweet-natured. All her life she had to contend 
with the jibes of her cantankerous husband who let no opportunity 
escape to remind her of her sin in mothering a bastard. Besides
James, she gave birth to eight other children. Those baby brothers and sisters were a blessing in disguise for James Baldwin, for they restricted his movements and prevented him from becoming a junkey or an alcoholic, considering the environment he lived in. While tending to their needs, he devoured a series of books that had caught his interest. By the time he was thirteen, he had read through all the books in the two libraries in Harlem and he then began frequenting the New York Public Library at 42 Street.44

Baldwin graduated from De Witt Clinton High School in 1942. There he was selected on the panel of the literary magazine, The Magpie. In Public School 24 he was a shy boy and the boys in the school gave him the sobriquets of "Froggy" and "pop eyes".45

A white teacher discovered in him a talent for writing and encouraged him. His first story was written at the age of twelve for a church magazine. It was much appreciated and the Mayor La Guardia of New York City congratulated him on his creative effort. School proved to be a hard and promising experience.

At Frederick Douglass Grammar High School he explored new avenues in weaving plots, writing plays and articulating ideas. He had always aspired for fame and riches. He felt he had discovered his vocation in life -- he would chart his destiny through his writings and fulfil his dreams of acquiring riches and fame through his vocation.
An overwhelming fact of Baldwin's childhood was his victimization by the white community. Initially, he felt the vice-like grip of racial prejudice indirectly -- through the brutality and degradation of the Harlem ghetto. The world beyond the ghetto was too distant on the horizon and he was unaware of the harrowing tales that made up the life stories of his people. But from all around a sort of terror hounded him, the terror which pervaded the environment. "I became, during the fourteenth year for the first time in my life, afraid -- afraid of the evil within me and afraid of the evil without." 46

The storefront Church offered a sanctuary from the terrors of life. He would seek safety by dedicating himself to the service of God, he decided. He underwent a religious conversion at the age of fourteen and became a junior preacher in the Pentecostal Church. He was suffused with pride. His experiences, connected with the conversion, find ample mention in Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953), The Fire Next Time (1963) and The Devil Finds Work (1976).

In the ensuing adolescent years his consciousness began registering the tensions of race and sex. He felt the bargain he had made with God was not to his advantage. He had surrendered his sexuality, his aspirations and his ambitions for too small a mess of pottage. In the sanctuary God had provided him, he felt walled in from the exciting, wicked world where all the action was. He was protected, no doubt, from grazing his psyche against the cruel
experiences of the world but at the same time he felt isolated. He wanted recognition of his potential as a man. The Church frowned upon all he yearned to do — he would fulfil his yearnings through his art. Sex and the history of his race troubled him. These became the constant themes in his writings. He felt life full of sins of commission was preferable to a life full of sins of omission. Denial of the "good things of life" was unacceptable to him.

The seventeenth year of his life proved to be a momentous one. He opted out of the Church, for being a minister of God had proved to be far from satisfying. His exciting school experiences, his love for watching plays, writing stories and his awareness of sex were activities the Church did not approve of. However, he recognised the power of God. "In spite of everything there was in the life, I fled, zest and a joy and a capacity for facing and surviving disasters that are very moving and very rare."48 He decided to leave home. Determined to support himself, he took up even low paid jobs.

On the recommendation of Richard Wright he received a Eugene F. Santon Memorial Trust Fellowship in 1945. In 1948, he was selected for the Rosewald Scholarship for a book he wrote in collaboration with Theodore Pelatowski. So far, in spite of six years of struggle, he still had no publication to his credit. This failure in the literary world, coupled with the twin pressures of his pledges and promises38 (he
threw the wedding ring in the Hudson River before the event) urged him to go into exile. Following Richard Wright’s example, Baldwin, in 1948, at the age of twenty four, left America for France, determined never to return.

I left America because I doubted my ability to survive the fury of the colour problem here .... I wanted to prevent myself from becoming merely a Negro; or even merely a Negro writer. I wanted to find out in what way the specialness of my experience could be made to connect me with other people instead of driving me from them.  

So Baldwin abandoned his natural habitat in search of a world of freedom, of self creation where he could realise the aspirations of his heart.

His nine years in Europe were an escape for Baldwin from his dominating, hate-mongering father and from the repressive and depressive institution of segregation established by the colour of the skin-- colour which belittled his "self" into merely a "Negro writer". Those years in France gave him a new perspective of the world and of his identity. He recognised the fact that "voyagers discover that the world can never be larger than the person that is in the world."  

He rubbed shoulders with established perspicacious writers like Chester Himes, James Jones, Philip Roth, William Styron, Norman Mailer etc. In Paris he experienced a passionate love affair -- the
warmth of it glows in the pages of his later fiction. He met Americans and he met Europeans and realised who he was — he was an American and could never be an African or a European. It was in Paris that he encountered Wright and the estrangement that had been simmering bitterness since Baldwin's "Everybody's Protest Novel" led to a complete irreconcilable split. Wright felt betrayed.

Two years after his arrival in Paris, Baldwin suffered a nervous breakdown. To recuperate he went off to Switzerland.

There in that alabaster landscape armed with two Bessie Smith records and a typewriter I began to try to recreate the life that I had first known as a child and from which I had spent so many years in flight .... I had never listened to Bessie Smith in America but in Europe she helped to reconcile me to being a nigger. 51

Bessie Smith enabled him to re-establish contact with his past dormant experience and from that experience emerged James Baldwin, the writer.

The immediate result of the change from the stifling atmosphere of the USA to the all-encompassing democratic universality of Paris prompted him to explore the world and make human contacts which would not be affected in any way by the colour of the skin. The setting was ideal for the ebullition of literary creation. Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953) was honed to the final version and received critical approbation all round. The Amen Corner 52 (1954) detailed
his acceptance of his racial heritage and consequently, his Negro past. Eleven of his essays, which attempted to fathom the Negro mind and unravel a nation's history, were published in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955). In 1957, *Giovanni's Room* made its splash in the literary waters. In the book Baldwin endeavoured to discover his identity; the theme of self acceptance was transmuted into an adventure in the realm of sex. This book was a little too intense and a little too lusty for American sensibilities.

These writings reflected his pre-occupation with personal issues and the issues which irked his nation.

In Europe he had certainly heard of Marx and Engels, imperialism and colonialism, but in his exile he had missed the day-to-day struggles (the Rosenbergs, Willie Megeel, the Mortinsville Senen) that had helped to shape his Afro-American contemporaries. Perhaps as a consequence, he was remarkably free of cliches, the bane of the creative writer, cliches not only of expression but of ideas. He had absolutely no gods either of the Left or the Right. He seemed free, as dice shooters say of the houseman, to call the shots the way he saw them. Naturally he was possessed of an outsized ego. 54

The Black Civil Rights struggle that had started emoting, evoking public opinion and public participation, motivated James Baldwin to return to the United States in July 1957 for initial first hand information of the racial upheaval that was threatening the white imperious arrogance. Coming back from a nine year exile, he went on a journey of discovery of the American South which he had never
before seen. Soon after, *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961) was published. Baldwin traced the first impressions of his arrival, and one gets the idea he was still grappling for an identity. Planning on a new venture, he looked around for a new theme but everywhere he drew a blank. Recalling that moment of crisis he wrote, "It is a point at which many artists lose their minds, or commit suicide, or throw themselves into good works, or try to enter politics." Ultimately, Baldwin tried his hand at "good works" and "politics".

Failing in his quest for new themes Baldwin fell back on the tradition of protest writing which he had so vehemently denounced a decade ago. No black American, he said, could escape feeling a murderous rage against the whites, but if he did not overcome his raging passions, the whites would goad him to bring out all the base animal passions, they said, lay leashed within him. If the black man succumbed to the pressure, he would have "surrendered his birthright as a man no less than his birthright as a black man."

In spite of his disillusionment he had faith in the American Dream. He was sure America would redeem its pledges to the black man -- the black man would ultimately find freedom and fulfilment and acceptance. In a letter to his nephew he said,
You must accept them (White Americans) and accept them with love, for these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand and until they understand it, they cannot be relaxed from it. 57

In the sixties a number of unnatural deaths shook him -- Medger Evers died in 1963, four little Sunday schoolgirls in Birmingham, Alabama, Malcolm X in 1965, Bobby Kennedy in 1968 and Martin Luther King Jr. In writing of Martin Luther King's death in 1972, he said,

Since Martin's death, in Memphis, and that tremendous day in Atlanta, something has altered in me, something has gone away. Perhaps even more than the death itself, the manner of his death has forced me into a judgement concerning human life and human beings which I had always been reluctant to make .... 58

His faith in America, his faith in the dream of America and his illusions in the essential goodness of the white American lay crumbled in dust. Naively he had deluded himself into believing the enchanting mirage of black-white brotherhood. He sounded a warning to the white people of America — the day of reckoning would come and they, too, would suffer if they continued to repress the Negro beyond the point of endurance. His voice changed its timbre to militancy and he began spewing out denouncements laced with bile.

The period of sixties became known as the period of James Baldwin. Throughout the sixties he was the spokesman for the
aspirations of the Negro race. As the scales fell off his eyes stripping the centuries old lies, he began exhorting his fellow black Americans to transcend the limitations and pressures which the white had imposed on him.

We are cruelly trapped between what we'd like to be and we actually are, and cannot possibly become what we'd like to be until we are willing to ask ourselves just why the lives we lead on this continent are so tame and so ugly.59

To adopt an ostrich-like attitude would be foolish and futile, for he realised the concept of an irreconcilable duality was imperative in American society. He, therefore, endorsed a very clear-cut theme of protest in every walk of life. The very characteristics of the protest fiction he had earlier rejected in his first essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel", he pursued with a single-minded zeal. His writings abandoned the optimistic tone and his commentary on social affairs inspired his interest in political affairs, and he began to spread the message of how blacks could survive in racist America. His writings, henceforth, became true sensitive accounts of the idea and ideals of the black man. He felt race was more of a moral problem than a political one. He began highlighting the negative aspects of racialism. The Civil Rights Movement and the Negro Revolution, current at that time, acclaimed his change of stance and glorified him for embracing the just cause of his race. Perceptibly, he began moving towards the ideology advocated by the Black Arts Movement.
I will state flatly that the bulk of country's white population impresses me and has impressed me for a very long time, as being beyond any conceivable hope of moral rehabilitation. They have been white, if I may so put it, too long, they have been married to the lie of white supremacy for long.

To assert the humanity of his people he had to give an outlet to the seething rage that seemed to be consuming him. Like Richard Wright, Baldwin had discovered that to assert his humanity he must give vent to his rage, but rage clouded the clarity of his prose and blurred the truth. His writings became harsh as he laced them with his pent up bitterness. The dominant theme of his next three books was protest expressed in strident, harsh tones. In Another Country (1962), The Fire Next Time (1963) and Blues For Mr. Charlie (1964) his prophetic utterings called upon fire and brimstone to fall on the heads of white oppressors who had socially, economically and sexually oppressed and repressed the Negro race.

The sixties was also a period of Civil Rights Movement. There were "sit-ins" "pray-ins", "sleep-ins", March on Washington and defiant disobedience in every sphere of social life. As winds of social change began blowing, new writers were sighted on the literary scene talking in determined tones of the Negroes' right to live in America as free and equal men. LeRoi Jones (Imam Amin Baraka) emerged as the dominant influence of the Black Arts Movement. Jones and his coterie of literary intellectuals called out to their
compatriots to proudly accept the term "Black Writer", who would, henceforth, talk to other black men and not to white men.

Baldwin refused to be wooed by the call of this creed. He was hesitant to align himself to any political cause. He insisted that as a writer he would still prefer to be called an "American Writer", governed only by the rules and obligations of his craft. He chose to be an observer who could impartially analyse the situation. He declared,

Most contemporary fiction, like most contemporary theatre is designed to corroborate your fantasies and make you walk out whistling. I don't want you to whistle at my stuff, baby. I want you to be sitting on the edge of your chair waiting, waiting, for a nurse to carry you out.62

Baldwin refused to take his audience into fantasyland. He wanted to grapple with reality. On this point he and the Movement concurred that art should not corroborate our fantasies. He did not deny that the artist was created by his society and the masses who inspired him to creativity. "What you do, you do, you must. The way the fish breathe water, writers write, if they don't, they'll die."63

The philosophy of Black Arts Movement advocated hatred for the white man -- experience of the black man in America did not inspire any other emotion. Hatred was a natural reaction
to oppression and repression. With impressive skill Baldwin expressed eloquently his dissent. Hatred and bitterness only destroyed, he felt. Those who hated became its victims. Only love had the transforming power to bring about redemption. He harboured an infinite, abiding faith in love in human interaction. The Black Arts Movement was wholly concerned with the black people but Baldwin elected to direct his thoughts to both white and black audiences — the black writer should explore all avenues to heighten the consciousness in all expressions of his art, he felt.

Though he differed from the ideology of the Black Arts Movement, Baldwin's artistic sensibilities had undoubtedly undergone a change. His moderateness had given way in the wake of the atrocities which continued to be perpetrated against his people. There was no holding back Baldwin as he snarled his rage without the earlier inhibiting proprieties professed by him. He felt America had ignored the fundamental principles that formed the basis of the American Dream which had envisaged that there would be gradual recognition of the Negroes' right to social and political equality and dignity when new social values would replace the old established values in the new world. America had betrayed love, justice, brotherhood and oneness enshrined in the tenets of Christianity and humanity.

This attitude of Baldwin continued till the mid-seventies and
then it seemed Baldwin had come full circle — a re-affirmation of faith evolved — hope sprang anew. His experiences in the wide world convinced him that America was a New World where the black man could hope for co-existence and racial reconciliation in a society reconstructed for the black man and the white man. They were both tied to a common fate. As a writer, Baldwin preferred to provoke human beings to think and discover eternal truths and thus elevate the human consciousness from the animal level to the human level. The endless cycle of hatred could only be ended through love and reconciliation and mutual acceptance. His writings explored the realm of pragmatism and prophecy and the theme of optimism and peace echoed in his subsequent works.

On May 19, 1976, on receiving an honorary Doctor of Letters degree at Morehouse College, Atlanta, Georgia, Baldwin stood before his audience and expressed belief in a tone of unmistakable exuberance that a change in relations had taken place during his life-time and the future was definitely hopeful.

When I was born, blacks generally were born trapped into a white man's fantasy. Black children are not trapped into a white man's fantasy now .... I feel a great wheel turning. This has never been a white country and the truth is coming out. Blacks have always been part of this country but the country has never been able to accept that. But we are flesh of the flesh, bone of the bone. And we will triumph.
As James Baldwin himself asserted in *Notes of a Native Son*, he did not want to be a Negro, he wanted to be a writer. He further contended that the effort required to become a great novelist "involves attempting to tell as much of truth as one can bear, and then a little more". 65

Very honestly Baldwin wanted to unmask the illusions; he attempted to make the white man see the Negro point of view, the sordid Negro world, the pain-inflicting environment, the social and economic pressures, the extreme poverty and the grim facts of perpetual subjugation of the Negro. "His ability to discover what and who he is, to accept this, and to be honest to his emotional impulses, however socially unacceptable they may be, is an expression of one of Baldwin's major insight." And again, "he has always tried to dig into the humbling soil of the experience of the Negro, the expatriate, the homo, and come out with uneasy disturbing truths ...." 67

Baldwin professed great pride in being a Negro and felt his fiction should mirror reality, should strip away the encrusting falsehood, destroy double consciousness, infuse truth and bring greater freedom to his race. He, however, eschewed propaganda in his fiction. The artist should be very much a part of the society that moulded his personality. The artist was a part of society but he should be careful to be objective in his writings, it is obligatory
on his part to assume the twin roles of artist and prophet. However, he warned that the artist was not a social reformer, his writings should aim at revealing the social ills and not at correcting them. His work was not to find answers to questions that rankled society — let the social reformers do that, he said. A true synthesis should be evolved from the divergent images we see without our different visions; truth might be disturbing but it was the writer's duty to project it. "The only way (to be a great writer) it seems to me, is not to complain about anything that happens to you - from starvation to champagne." 68

Baldwin drew upon his own pain, his nightmares, his frustrations, his joys and his sorrows and analysed them from a new perspective. His past had been part of the larger issues that faced the United States. The bitter truth was honestly recorded.

The objective of his writings was to arrive at a common ground where all differences and misunderstandings ceased to exist between the white man and the black man. His artistic mission was to shake up white complacency and encourage blacks to get well out of abject apathy. The desire for communication, co-existence and brotherhood alone could bring about the desired change. Mankind was united by its humanity and it was not rage and anger but love and understanding that held the resolution to the tangle of distrust and disharmony. He was of the opinion that prefigurative writing
could bring about the desired resolution in American society. All his writing career he rejected being labelled a "black writer" -- he always wanted to be "a writer".

James Baldwin is an American writer who is neither black nor white, but who uses, and exists within the English language .... As a writer he has no colour but only mind and feeling as they are realised in words. He is simply a writer in English who had imposed on him by circumstances a point of view made tragic by those very circumstances. All his writings are speeches out of the play which the tragedy of his race is.

James Baldwin's fiction, essays and plays recognise that there is something definitely very wrong with the world. The theme of rejection and negation that pervades his writings highlights the blacks' persecution at every level and how the resilience of the blacks has helped them to survive despite tremendous odds. This theme has been persistent from "Sonny's Blues", written in 1948, to his most recent novel, If Beale Street Could Talk (1974). This was also the theme around which revolved his two plays The Amen Corner and Blues for Mister Charlie, first performed in 1965. His essays evolved from the same theme -- the black surviving in spite of the formidable odds stacked against him.

Baldwin's essential theme is life -- death -- passion ... the perpetual theme since the Greeks and long before .... But the particular raw material from which Baldwin derives his underlying attitude is the "racial question".
Another theme that is repeated now and again exhorts the Americans to save America for their future generations. It runs through from Baldwin's earliest writings to his recent novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk*. We have Tish, Sharon and Joe frenziedly determined to bring Fonny's child into the world. "Every trial, every beating, every drop of blood, every tear, were meant to be used by us for a day that was coming, not for us, perhaps, but for our children." 72

Baldwin enjoyed the reputation of being one of America's most talented essayists. He was considered a better essayist than a novelist. His essays won him highly profuse acclaim. In Irving Howe's opinion, Baldwin is one of the two or three greatest essayists America has ever produced. 73

James Baldwin was an intelligent, deeply perceptive prophet who wrote crystal clear prose tinted with passionate, poetic rhythm, with remarkable insight into the moral and social situations prevailing in America. His essays are informative, philosophic, honestly realistic, agonised and sensitive accounts of hatred and love and tell crucial truths about ourselves and all men. They encompass a variety of subjects in their ambit, truthfully highlighting the plight of the black man. The essays are pre-occupied with the Negro's physical, mental and spiritual trauma and how he is
endeavouring to achieve a measure of dignity and identity. Ultimately man's redemption lies in his own nature. Each essay portrays a facet of an experience that is deeply moving and impressive.

Baldwin uses the first person singular when the narration is wholly personal and when the assertion is of the white oriented society he uses "we" and "ours". In "Everybody's Protest Novel", speaking of the white-oriented society, he says, "Society is held together for our need. We bind it together". There is absolutely no varnishing or white-washing the truth, even the awful truth.

His essays subtly explore the ambiguities and ironies of life lived on two levels — that of a Negro and that of a man. With remarkable insight he delineates Negro life in America, Sweden, Germany, Switzerland, France and writes of Richard Wright, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Elijah Mohammad, his family etc. and has enough discernment to talk intelligently about Church, Christianity, Jazz, Blues, Americanism, sex, politics, death, hatred, right and wrong and bigoted religion. His ideas are effectively draped in traditional fiery rhetoric. The artistic expression and autobiographical devices heighten interest of the reader. Because he draws upon his own experiences, we can believe him to bear faithful witness to the truth.

Baldwin's essays are an odyssey through pain, hatred and pain of hatred he felt for his father, the white man and for himself.
He finally transcends his base passions and the slur of a coloured skin. Towards the white man he has an attitude of forbearance, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

The theme of his essays is the white man's treatment of the Negro and of the white man's consequent and subsequent loss of respect in the black man's eyes. He portrays the Negro as a lonely man fighting with a desperation born out of futility to make a proper place for himself under the sun. He keeps reminding us again and again how the Negro in America has been scarred and branded by the prevailing conditions of life. He clamours repeatedly that America must change, must learn to accept and love the Negro.

Baldwin's essays can be compiled as a true record of racial relations. He has four volumes of essays to his credit. Notes of a Native Son (1955), Nobody Knows My Name (1961), The Fire Next Time (1963) and No Name in the Street (1972), are fine accounts that emphasise that for too long the white Americans have based their ideals and actions on illusions to cheat the Negro. He investigates beyond the mirage of the American Dream.

Richard Rupp has categorised Baldwin's wide array of essays in five major classes. 1. The Search for Identity. 2. Alienation. 3. The Search for a Usable Past. 4. The Negro as American. 5. The Need for Love.
The June 1949 issue of the Partisan Review carried an article "Everybody's Protest Novel" by James Baldwin rejecting the Protest Tradition in fiction as bad art. Protest fiction, he declared, was "to find a lie more palatable than the truth". He felt the writer should make a journey towards a more vast reality which must take precedence over all other claims. The essay deplored Richard Wright and other writers of his ilk who wrote in self-righteous indignation of unmotivated brutality and violence. Protest and propaganda do not elevate literature. Wright responded, "All literature is protest. You can't name a single novel that isn't protest". Baldwin retorted "... all literature might be protest but all protest was not literature.".

Two years later, another essay by James Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone" appeared in the same magazine. It criticised more vitriolically the school of naturalistic protest fiction, the barbs being more explicit. In his opinion it was wrong to portray the Negro as a symbol of social protest or as a creature of super sexual powers -- on the contrary the emphasis should be on the Negro as a unique member of his community.

These two essays were later compiled in the volume of Notes of a Native Son (1955). In the "Autobiographical Notes" he gives us a glimpse of his early years in Harlem, his education till going to Paris, his last conversation with his father and his discovery of
what it means to be an American. The essays are considered to be amongst the best in American literature. The essential theme is quest for identity and the repeated refrain is, "Who am I? How can I be myself?" Writing helped him to analyse his experiences and accept his fate as a "Native Son" and also helped him to focus his views on reality. It was in Paris he discovered his birthright as a black man.

In "Harlem Ghetto", Baldwin examined the problems that have dogged the black man in the largest ghetto of the United States and came to the conclusion that it was the betrayal by the traditions of his land that was responsible for the Negro's frustration and deprivation and his fear-filled refusal to accept or recognise his "worth".

In "Stranger in the Village", Baldwin is the stranger in a Swiss village nestling amongst the mountains. The villagers had never seen a Negro. They showed their wonder by touching him, his hair, his colour, all that made him feel not quite human. One redeeming feature of that experience was that the children felt honoured when he stopped to speak to them.

The other essays in this volume are interpretations of his experiences and commentaries on his encounters and observations. The solution to the racial tangle lies in the white man learning to live with the Negro in order to live with himself.
But the great thing about these essays is that the form allows him to work out all the conflicts raging in him so that finally the "I", the "James Baldwin" who is so saasy and despairing and bright, manages without losing his authority as the central figure to show us all the different people hidden in him, all the voices for which the "I" alone can speak.  

The welter of bitterness raging in his heart, the hatred, the rage, his job experiences and obsessions are recounted in detail. He wanted "to do something to crush these white faces which were crushing me".

He further elaborated that "one must never, in one's own lifetime accept these injustices as common place but must fight them with all one's strength." Ultimately Baldwin found liberation because he learnt to use his historical past and transform his experiences into art.

Nobody Knows My Name (1961) is considered to be the best book of essays by Baldwin. He becomes interpretative and perceptive as he critically acquaints us with his experiences in Europe and America — some of the experiences have deeply troubled him. The question of identity remains permanent. Playing the role of a reporter, he gave an account of Conference of African Writers and Artists, his visits to Harlem and the deep South and his personal relations with Richard Wright and Norman Mailer. Characters
portrayed are in violent conflict with themselves — they are caught in a bewildering dilemma of identity.

The theme of alienation is given prominence in two of his essays "East River, Down Town" and "Nobody Knows My Name". He recounts the demonstration of protest by the blacks at the United Nations when Patrice Lumumba was killed. He justifies the rebellion, maintaining that "blacks have every right to refuse to be bound by a set of attributes as useless now and as obsolete as the pillory." Baldwin warns that the demonstration at the United Nations is just a tip of the iceberg of the general malaise and discontent among the blacks and called upon the country to accept the fact or be prepared for the imminent explosive situation.

"Fifth Avenue, Uptown: A Letter from Harlem" presents the bitter despair of a black man caught in the unending struggle for survival. Baldwin gives us a glimpse of the housing tenement where his house stood. Then he steps out into the street, chalks out the situation prevailing in the country and talks of the housing project. Concluding the essay, he writes, "Walk through the streets of Harlem and see what we, this nation, have become". "This is the book of a deeply troubled man, the spiritual autobiography of someone who hopes by confronting more than one beast on his way to see whether his fear is justified".
The Fire Next Time was published in 1963. The main essay spotlights attention on religion. Baldwin describes his early life in Harlem, his religious conversion and his success as a rhetorical preacher. He delves deep into the multiple dualities in which the black man is trapped because of the skin-deep colour of his skin. Christianity and the Christians have disillusioned him. When he visits Elijah Muhammad, he finds there is much in Islam which can prove tempting to the black man. The white man must abandon the fictitious notion that America is a white nation. He exhorts the Americans to heed the prophetic warning "God gave Noah the rainbow sign. No more water, the fire next time". As a public spokesman for civil rights, he urges defiance and as an artist demands redressal against the wrongs committed by the fanatical white society.

No Name in the Street (1972) unfolds before us a panoramic view of the theme of alienation. An international dimension is added to the essay through his experience in France and Algeria. Personal experiences in Harlem are narrated. Brutalities inflicted and harassment of Algerians at the hands of the Paris police is related. He then goes on to discuss racism in the South. He draws up similarities between Algerians and Negroes, both victims of history and circumstances. In the epilogue of the book, Baldwin still hopes for the birth of a new world which is ready to be born. It will not be easy but hope we must for the new generation. Baldwin
speaks as a prophet when he likens the artist to a revolutionary — both are in search of answers to momentous questions.

The seventies brought some peace to Baldwin's troubled soul. In 1971, A Rap On Race, a taped conversation he had with Margaret Mead, an anthropologist, spoke of the political turbulence of the sixties. Mead opined that Baldwin still had to travel a certain distance to understand world racism. In 1973, in A Dialogue with Nikki Giovanni, he tried to bridge the generation gap to understand the Black Liberation Movement. One Day When I was Lost (1973) is a movie scenario based on the autobiography of Malcolm X. If Beale Street Could Talk was published in 1974. Hollywood producers had distorted the black man and his way of life. Baldwin's hackles were up. In The Devil Finds Work (1976), he conducted an analysis of several movies which showed the Negro in poor light. The book is an autobiographical history of the black man working in films. Little Man, Little Man: A Story of Childhood was published in 1976.

Just Above My Head (1979), a book of fiction, has a diversity of themes such as the black family, father-son relationship, black music and artistry.

In 1981 he returned to the United States to collect material for an essay on the unsolved murders of almost thirty children in
Atlanta. The Evidence of Things Not Seen finally evolved into a book and coincided with the publication of The Price of the Ticket, a collection of his essays from 1948 to 1985. According to James Campbell in the Sunday Statesman, August 24, 1984, he was also working on a triology of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Edgar Mears. Remember This House, his next project, was to be on Jesse Jackson.

In the past, black writers wrote for the white audience either for monetary rewards or to win support for the black cause. This was specially true of black playwrights who depended on box office support from white patrons. But since the sixties a number of playwrights had followed the lead given by LeRoi Jones and written exclusively for a black audience. Those works were categorised as Black Arts Drama. The aim was to educate blacks, to make them aware of their need for liberation.

Baldwin synthesised the aims of both in his plays. He wrote for the white audience and denounced them and at the same time his plays were for the black audience.

The Amen Corner was the first play published by James Baldwin. It was first presented at Howard University and directed by Owen Dodson. It is not an anti-white play; it informs and educates blacks and the theme is the enduring strength of love. Love
transcends the petty jealousies and quarrels in a black family. The play has the characteristics of the Black Arts Drama, for it is a black experience told to a black audience and the white spectator is completely ignored.

Blues for Mr. Charlie (1964) is a protest play and tries to construct a bridge between the black man and the white man. However, the white characters were not convincing to the black audience and there were scenes in the play in which much of black humour went above the heads of the white audience. They could not understand why the black audience went into peals of laughter when they saw nothing funny. The leaders of the two communities got together to explain to each other how much progress they were making but the lie stood out.

Baldwin was of the opinion that an artist could not exist apart from his society that produced him. His inspiration lay in the social milieu that hewed his personality. Baldwin drew upon the negative as well as positive experiences; he accepted and acknowledged his past, though it evoked painful memories. He sifted his joys and sorrows to understand the essence of life. The writer, in his opinion, was a prophet and functioned as a social corrective—reconciling our exalted images of ourselves with the truth. The artist had to bring about a reconciliation between two divergencies. Though the artist was part of society and of society, he should
isolate himself to cultivate a position of objectivity, thought Baldwin. Another assumption he worked on was that the task of the artist was to reveal the short-comings of society and not to find solutions to problems that riddled the matrix of society. The artist is an illuminator and not a reformer. Another pre-assumption pervasive in his artistic works is that all mankind is united by its humanity. He wanted to discover a meeting place where all differences between man and man ceased to exist.

From the sixties onwards a time of foment fostered new literary movements. Two main, equally strong movements -- the Black Aesthetic Tradition and the Black Aesthetic Movement diametrically opposed to each other, ran parallel from the sixties onwards. The Black Aesthetic Tradition evolved out of the Second Harlem Renaissance and the Black Aesthetic Movement believed in the ideology of militancy. It was a militant movement spearheaded by LeRoi Jones. The group asserted in novel, poem, essay and story its strong passions and endeavoured to put their cultural background in proper perspective.

In the era gone by the Negroes were anxious to become Americans and share in the societal laws and mores. The black artist yearned for assimilation in the American literary mainstream. The black artist in the past had written with the white public in mind. He wrote a watered-down version of the atrocities in the
South. The North paraded a charade of liberal ideology — but all the people could not be fooled all the time. As awareness seeped in, the liberal ideology, both social and literary, came under heavy fire of the black artist. In the novels of J.A. Williams, Sam Green Lee, Cecil Brown, Ron Welburn, Ishmael Reed, LeRoi Jones and Hoyt Fuller the liberal ideology was brought before the public and unmasked to reveal beneath, the hiatus between word and deed of the so-called liberals.

The Aesthetic Tradition had its origin in the Harlem Renaissance of the twenties. The sixties marked another era of awakening in the black literary sphere. The black writers endeavoured to discard the Protest Tradition and universalise their writings. They explored new fields in innovative writings and experimented with new forms, themes and styles. The intense anger and militancy pervading the earlier writings began disappearing. A universal approach towards black problems and issues was adopted.

The Black Aesthetic Tradition revolutionised black literature. Votaries of this tradition portrayed life with sensibility and sensitivity without any dominant overtones or undertones of racial protest. They wanted to merge their writings with the mainstream literature and translated the complexities in an artistic style into frozen visuals. The literary horizons of the artists widened beyond their own Negro struggle to include world events and they made
conscious efforts to eradicate the misconceptions of their race. They transcended the social, political and economic limitations and pushed away the boundaries of colour. They transported themselves into a cosmopolitan world where there was black consciousness but no black colour.

This form of writing began taking several new directions such as neo-gothic, surrealistic and nouveau roman, and emphasised the realistic portrayal of life — life as an experience. The complexities of life could not be interpreted by the established outworn and time-worn techniques. New mediums were forged — reality and fantasy gave shape to themes hitherto unthought of — cosmic satire, mythopoesis, myth, "Blues" tradition and vaudeville coloured the world in exciting hues. There was no cause and effect relationship and there was no traditional beginning, middle and end.

The adherents of this tradition laid accent on stylistic innovations and strove to elevate their writings to the pinnacle of art. The portrayal of characters was not ethnic but human and the themes of these writings went beyond the boundaries of colour and protest.

A fallout of a number of events like the non-implementation of the desegregation laws, non-violent movement of Martin Luther King Jr. and his subsequent death, the Civil Rights Movement, the Montgomery March snowballed into the Black Arts Movement. In the sixties, the
Black Aesthetic Movement marked an exciting stage of black expression and self-definition in black experience. Race pride and self definition dominated the black mind.

The militant Black Arts Movement was forged by the Black Aesthetic Movement (literary) and Black Power (political) symbolising the Afro-American’s aspirations for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts were nationalistic and showed a relationship between art and politics and art of politics. Both merged to form the Black Arts Movement and packed enough clout to define the world according to their own notions. They intended to destroy the myth of white superiority and abandon the defensive posture. They asserted that black people would defend themselves frankly and fearlessly against white hostility. Their aim was not to convert the white attitude but awaken a new sensitivity in the black man.

The black revolt in the literary field had thrown up writers who re-evaluated Western aesthetics, the traditional role of the writer and social function of art. Books by black writers were written for the black public. They advocated the interpretation of black life style, rhythms, images, forms of language, usage and idioms which black people had evolved from black experience. They attempted to bring about a cultural revolution and at the same time endeavoured to preserve their cultural character.

The Black Arts Movement spoke directly to the people. It was an ethical movement designed to destroy white ideas, white ways
of looking at the world and prescribed definitions of blackness. The social crisis fostered the revolution and the black artists worked actively towards transforming society. They opposed dogmatism, stressed importance of the individual and originality of the black artist. They demanded that everything pertaining to blacks should be controlled by blacks. White racism should not be allowed to exercise its domination in affairs of the black man. In the past, even anthologies of black writings were edited by whites, they would not be allowed to do so, henceforth. The influence of white publishers and editors would be done away with. Nearly all writers of this tradition were politically active, hence there was interaction between the Aesthetic Movement and Black Power.

De-Americanisation was the aim of every Black Aesthetic, in fact, it was the heart of the movement. It wanted to do away with double consciousness i.e. looking at oneself through the contemptuous eyes of another. To become an American was a soul-racking and soul-wrecking experience, so they would denounce it and renounce it. The American Negro would, in the future, be known as Afro-American or black man — the word "Negro" would be eliminated from the vocabulary. One thing was certain, black colour would become a tangible reality in white America.

The Black Arts Movement fostered a new unity, an ethical entity and successive waves of enlightened black consciousness of unprecedented intensity and extensity. The journey from slavery
to a well-defined "self" was long and arduous but "they would overcome".

Ishmael Reed was born on 22 February 1938 in Chattanooga, Tennessee. His birth on 22 February presaged, to some extent, his future association with fantasy, myth and necromancy, for he dabbled with these concepts in all his writings. (The number '22', according to him, is the most powerful number in Hoodoo numerology.) At the age of four, he and his mother left Chattanooga to settle in Buffalo, New York, where he attended elementary and high school. Finally, he left for New York City.

Right from childhood he was very fond of literary activities. As a kid, he used to confine himself to his room and read through the fairy tales stocked in his library. He succumbed to their allure. Then he would allow his mind to wander in the realm of fantasy, fascinated by the hypnotic spell of strange knowledge, more alluring than life itself, and came in possession of secrets veiled in mystery. While he contemplated on the supernatural elements and meditated on their meaning, the mystic darkness lifted — the circle of his vision broadened and his penetrating spirit was able to probe the magic vignettes of ages gone by. It is probable that it was during this time that notions and concepts higher than the laws of nature and teachings of man, transpired in his mind and sowed the seeds of his literary future in the folds of his imagination.
He had always been interested in writing, in giving concrete shape to the phantoms that flitted past his mind's eye. With his fascinating literary artistry he sketched his mystic visions in his stories. Writing was an activity which he thoroughly enjoyed, for the yearning to write had been his heart's desire from the time he could remember. As early as the second grade, he remembers, he had written a successful play about a young man in search of his future. At thirteen, Reed started writing for the newspaper.

He had begun to write in his first year of college at the State University of New York at Buffalo. During this time he worked with various newspapers, among them the East Village Other. In addition to writing, he wanted to publish -- he described himself as a novelist and a publisher. At the age of twenty, he joined hands with Al Young to start Yardbird Reader in California. He also tried his hand at audio magazine called Steeve Canon Show. Besides this, he has produced television shows. "Before Columbus" was a venture that endeavoured to popularise the ethnic writings of the lesser known writers like Asian-Americans, Irish-Americans, Chinese-Americans etc. Motivated by his intense interest in publishing, he accepted the chairmanship of the "Co-ordinating Council of Literary Magazines" and with sincere constructive purpose broadened the publishing opportunities for young struggling writers, fighting social and ethnic bias.
Ishmael Reed has had innumerable writer-in-residence assignations and has taught at Dartmouth, Yale, Spellman College and the University of Buffalo. He is presently teaching at the University of Berkeley. His greatest contribution is making the American literary strand as multi-cultural and multi-dimensional as possible.

The sixties were dominated by Ishmael Reed, Clarence Major and Charles Wright, protagonists of "fabulation" as a literary mode. In their writings it is difficult to demarcate between reality and fantasy. The traditional literary limitations of time, space, situation, sequence and human laws were relegated to oblivion, for they hindered the expressing of complex situations of life. They felt fantasy would be an appropriate mode for expressing reality. They visualised their fictional world and with the help of "fabulation" fabricated etchings to create larger designs of reality. Even the fictional characters were not always men but birds and animals who stated the profundities of life without inhibitions or prejudices. The plot was immaterial, the cause-effect relationship was trivial and the beginning, middle and end theory was unimportant. Technically, this stream of thought was completely alienated from the age-old epic plot -- the favourite mode of the protest writer. Hence, fabulistic writing was devoid of protest and not popular with the protest writer who wanted to spit bile and propagate propaganda in all his pronouncements. In this form of writing the immediate problems of humanity were disregarded and
the writer tried to depict reality in comprehensible abstractions. The idea was to construct a collage of life without prejudice — white or black.

Black writings following that stream of consciousness became eclectic and universal in their approach and aimed at becoming part of the American literary main-stream. Their themes were no longer whinings against colour, white community's selfishness or exhortations to the Afro-Americans to strike back hard at the white community. Their characters were picked from the whole of humanity, speaking English or various dialects of English with a distinctive class touch, slang or colloquial. They were drawn from the eastern and western cultural settings. The language they spoke was the real American language and the writers felt it would be ideal for American prose and poetry. The ghetto was no longer the source of this inspiration but man who was symbolic of humanity. History, society and fantasy were forged together in their literary creations. Another peculiar literary device they often made use of was that occasionally, in the course of the narration, the writer stepped in to give an interpretation of some intricate expression.

However, in the tradition of fantasy, too, there were overtones that were distinctively black. The black man had not merged in the literary mainstream at the cost of his identity or his blackness — he retained both. During this period the Protest Tradition was
completely swamped by the Black Aesthetic Tradition.

Ishmael Reed was undoubtedly one of the most brilliant, outrageously illogical and ludicrously unorthodox writers of the sixties. Juxtaposing synthetically reality and fantasy in abstract form, mixing fact with fiction, he projected hilarious anachronisms from life and of life, making use of folklore, mythology, caricature, folk roots, street language and racial idioms. From his forays into the psychic world he wrote prolifically and diversely of visions that blended and overlapped. Christianity, voodoo, politics, religion, mythology of ancient Egypt, black culture, black women writers, art of vodoun were all taken in ambit and reflected a dazzling array of multi-culturalism. Adapting African spirit and religion to American ways, he ridiculed the threadbare-through-overuse cliches and traditional forms that like empty vessels made much noise.

Ishmael Reed has a distinct vision, a conspicuous style, a discerning eye, a quick recording ear, a virtriotic tongue. Working in a number of mediums, he adamantly refused to be categorised according to a particular school of thought. Imaginatively he creates a world skillfully designed to allow a free play to his idiosyncracies and peccadilloes. His captivating humour parodies with impudence the soap opera, news-paper headlines, obscure issues, political controversies, reveals creative possibilities of magic, Satan, witchcraft and knowledgeably informs us that our struggle in life
is for the sanity of a befuddled mind and clarity of a blurred vision. All the time, while our mind is trying to unravel the mysteries of his thought-stream, he is transporting us to higher degrees and higher planes of existence.

In an introduction to a collection of essays, *Shrovetide in New Orleans*, Ishmael Reed says,

Many people have called my fiction muddled, crazy, incoherent, because I have attempted in fiction the techniques and forms, painters, dancers, film makers, musicians in west have taken for granted for at least fifty years, and the artist of many other cultures, for thousands of years.

With uncommon talent he explores the mythic labyrinthes of various cultures. From different perspectives he interprets their messages veiled in secrecy. He has a radically personal style in language that is flexible enough to range from the street slang to the zenith of estheticism to translate his powerful visions of a world hidden from the eye of the westerner. Reed combines the qualities of the Afro-American dialect, slang and western jargon and colloquialism, a pure comic effect is produced when he transgresses beyond the traditional forms and spells words as they are phonetically spoken, e.g. "nekkid" for "naked" and "furriner" for "foreigner". With a free swinging enthusiasm he peppers his works with a lively pot-pourri of puns, neologisms, racial cant, unusual
linguistic motifs, paradoxes, metaphors and similes. He speaks mostly in figures of speech.

Reed's writings are not racial. The abject misery of the Negro does not interest him. He avoids siding with the Negro and shuns the bitter frustration and hopelessness of his existence— the maudlin theme songs of the modern black writers. The black and the white have a common history and a common culture; he appeals to them to step out of their narrow confines of prejudice and warped hostility. If whites become victims of his scatological, the blacks fare no better. "Well, as far as my work is concerned I've been told by Blacks that they don't get off too well in my books either." 89

Reed refuses to focus his spotlight on the sorry plight of the slave and his oppression. The black man does not arouse pity or sympathy in him. He is influenced by the slave narrative to the extent that he consciously avoids the form of this tradition, made so popular by Harriet Beecher Stowe. He wants his fiction to be functional and not bitter recriminations strung together; he wants to be a novelist and not a spokesman. The slaves in his books are cunning, living by their wits and outwitting both whites and blacks. He destroys the myth of "Uncle Tom" and re-examines slavery from a new perspective. The old stereotypes of Negroes caricatured by writers are destroyed by him. All his novels do define specific black identity but they are not celebrations of
blackness. His Neo-HooDoo myth may be mistaken as a plea for defining black identity. He is at loggerheads with the Black Aesthetic Movement. He makes conscious efforts to prevent his art from degenerating into protest. He also liberates the novel from the traditional straitjacket rules and directs his battery of verbal darts at black women writers, black revolutionaries and offensive posturing of rhetorics, waging prolonged, tireless campaigns against convention and orthodoxy within the world of black arts and radical politics. He opposes the racism and communalism of black nationalists.

In spite of his outrageous verbal attacks and hilarious anachronisms, Ishmael Reed is a committed artist. In the garb of satire and humour he states his moral viewpoint in no uncertain terms. With the help of absurd allusions and far-fetched imagery he fascinates us with pyrotechnical medley of far-fetched similes and metaphors, caustic commentary on social issues, folk-lore, black history, black folk-tales. He erases boundaries between mythology and biblical references and secular history.

Approaching literature from a metafictive angle, off tangent from the traditional neo-slave narrative, Reed writes in a complex, learned and witty style (Mumbo Jumbo has a bibliography of five pages) and with intense awareness. Using various literary devices he rambles in the realms of fancy, fantasy, nationalism, international
conspiracies, autobiography, films, mysticism, folk-lore, history, dreams, comedy, science fiction, music, rock, "Blues", occult and vodoun and a host of other subjects. Armed with knowledge from Jung, he has developed the mental faculty to make visible the reality hidden from the undiscerning.

The poet now and then catches sight of the figures that people the night world — spirits, demons and gods, he feels the secret quickening of human fate by superhuman design and has a presentiment of incomprehensible happenings in the pleroma. In short, he catches a glimpse of the psychic world.

With his eclectic approach he attempts to explore the mythic past of the black man and restore to him his mystic vision. In his novels he breaks the tradition of pseudo-autobiographical style used by Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison.

No matter what mode Ishmael Reed adopts to convey his thoughts, his writings construct a world that is hilariously ludicrous and ridiculous. Revelling in the tradition of the grotesque and the burlesque — his mode is satire — he shreds the follies of the black and the white communities, his aim is to emphasise that the pot should not call the kettle black. With an indigenous humour coming to him spontaneously, he creates original, exciting and comic images. With an uncanny knack, he builds collages of suggestive, minute details, super-imposing them with images. With bubbling enthusiasm,
sportive prose, he works in multi-cultural, multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary mediums. Unfolding his wares of satirical and symbolic references, he caricatures and satirises the idiosyncrasies of society, the government and the Church. In Mumbo Jumbo the target is the government and society, in Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down it is the traditional church.

His literature is imbued with parody and derision and takes every opportunity to make a humorous dig at the tradition of black fiction and its heroes, who are always in search of something. Burlesque and parody are modes to free literary style from the ennui of effete tradition and give it new directions, different from the Anglo-American forms which are inadequate and inappropriate for spelling out black experience. Some of his literary devices defy interpretation unless the reader is tuned to his wavelength.

A cloud moved above, sagging with rain. It seemed as if it had eyes, nose, lips, it did. My eyes, nose and lips. Get it? Clouds. Head in Clouds.

Ishmael Reed wishes to explore life through the mode of mythopoesis, too. Mythopoesis is derived from the Greek word "to make", to create", so a significant characteristic of mythopoesis is that it transforms and transcreates, forging and forking into speculative directions, hitherto unthought of by the literary mind. Reed is steeped in myth and multi-cultural forms which he puts in
a crucible together with varying proportions of religion, philosophy, art, psychology and current events, waves his magic wand and creates new versions of fantasy in thought.

Mythopoesis is a blending of historical perspective and myth, and traces the apparent relation between the two. The whole spectrum of history — primeval, past and present—goes past our vision like a pageant of inter-woven motifs taken from classical myths of King Arthur, Antigone, Osiris - Isis etc. He does not ignore the western myths though he delves deep into the voodoo or the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic based on black magic. Nor is he interested in pure myths, whether they are black or white in hue. Myths are stories as if they actually took place. Mythopoesis attempts to give a symbolic meaning to those myths. It can be visualised as an agent which can correct social wrongs and give directions to moral values through the innate philosophy of life which is its core.

By combining a series of myths with related historical events, Reed conjures up a bewildering array of themes that are innovative, bewitching and reflect his artistic expertise with words and themes. In every novel of Reed a myth or legend causes confrontation between the mystic thought and historical perspective. The plurality of cultural events brings him closer to history of the present and makes him a visionary moralist. As there is inter-relation and inter-action
between history and myth in mythopoesis, Mumbo Jumbo can be read as a myth as well as cosmic satire. The mythopoesic heroes evolve an identity and a personality through various stages of dangerous adventures they undertake. There is no final resolution of the adventurous journey. The end is not always happy though there is a silver lining which spells hope. As the adventure ends, there is a sense of freedom, goodness, peace and prosperity prevailing in the society. For example, in the Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down Loop Garo Kid's journey into the unknown and unexplored lands beyond the seas speculates that the city of Cibola, the dream world, will be restored to its pristine glory. Another kind of hero in mythopoesis literature can be a serious threat to society. Consequently, society devises ways and means to ostracise him.

Reed is certain that the Dionysian Spirit is not imbued with racial hues, so the world will not be torn apart by prejudice, mistrust and misunderstanding if this Spirit is accepted. It attempts to transcend the social boundaries to reach realism and builds on the ultimate vision in which society, history and myth blend together.

Reed draws upon special and specific historical incidents and events concerning the blacks. There is enough evidence in his work that he cares for the blacks. He writes of a distinctive black experience against a backdrop of mythic experience that began in
Africa and was transported to America when the Africans were brought in chains to the American shores. His novels feature blacks and he attempts to give a positive definition to "Blackness" in terms of Neo-HooDoo myth though his novels cannot be termed as social propaganda or social protest.

In Reed's novels, too, the heroes undertake dangerous journeys, overcome formidable obstacles but there is no clearcut victory. The heroes' quest is a stirring within the society — there is hope and optimism. Besides, there is satire which is gentle, sympathetic and compassionate and is called cosmic satire in the mythopoetic system.

Another mode within the framework of fantasy, popular with Reed, is the Neo-HooDoo which is the American version of African VooDoo, a sort of spontaneous creative energy that strives for the liberation of the spirit. Neo-HooDoo gives a new direction to Afro-American literature -- radical diversion from the writings of the white contemporaries. Reed professed a departure from the Anglo literary creeds.

Neo-HooDoo is not a school of thought but is rather a posture of the mind, a complexity of impressions that are idiomatic in origin and which infuses a continuous and constant influence which binds people in it. The Black Aesthetic Movement in 1969 came in the literary
garb of neo-literary HooDooism and compounded such diverse rudimentary aspects of the African heritage as dance, drama, religion, magic, sculpture and a wide variation of neo-African art. Myths were invented and primeval legends were invoked. A new consciousness gripped the black mind. Voodoo is similar to HooDooism and has its roots in African Voudoun. It is a literary device to mirror the world of reality hidden from western eyes and to reflect the Afro-American experience.

The spirit of HooDoo is the secret of the blackman's survival in America despite the formidable odds that he has had to face. Reed gives it a distinctively Afro-American colouring in all its aspects and propagates it in all his works.

One finds the original tall tales and yarns with the kind of originality that some modern writers use .... Neo-HooDooism is a spur to originality. In ancient Egypt writing was considered a royal profession and the writer, a necromancer, a soothsayer, a priest, a prophet, who opened doors to the divine.94

Besides other sources, Reed derives his ideas from the Egyptian mythology and his deep understanding of Jung and Freud psychological theories. He uses the Neo-HooDoo metaphysical system as a motif to give colour to his aesthetic writings. Tracing history from an unusual perspective he links it to myth through an eclectic approach — this makes it meaningful to contemporary society. He uses the prefiguration techniques to discover the truth of human
nature — he creates unique patterns in the literary texture by manipulating character and plot, capturing different facets from different angles.

The Neo-HooDoo aesthetic is supple and malleable and allows enough freedom to mould the subject matter. Reed applies the technique of "Condensation" — a pattern in which a number of figures relate to one event or a single character and "Fragmentation" — a situation where a single prefiguration is refracted across a number of modern figures.

In the "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto", which first appeared in Los Angeles Free Press (Sept. 18-24, 1970), Reed devised a myth that defined history as a war between two communities i.e. repressiveness of the Christian west and the spontaneous exuberance of the African HooDooism and the Osiris rites. In 1971 Reed published his version of the "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto" in Confrontation, a journal of the third world. He opined that Neo-HooDooism is a resurrection of a spiritual mythic attribute suppressed into a "distortion" by centuries of slavery of the African. It represents a new dimension of the Afro-American literature, modifying themes and forms and liberating itself from the decadent presumptions and assumptions of the Anglo-American literature which the black writers of the past had adopted. There is a distinct "Blackness" in the literature of Neo-HooDoo.
Necromancers in Neo-HooDoo are prophets empowered with seeing things from a non-western angle.

People go into the past and get some metaphor from the past to explain the present or the future. I call this necromancy because that's what it is .... Necromancers used to lie in the guts of the dead or in the tombs to receive visions of the future. That's what I wanted to do.95

In the introduction to the 19 Necromancers From Now96 Reed elaborates,

The Afro-American artist is similar to the Necromancer (a word whose etymology is revealing in itself). He is a conjurer who works juju upon his oppressor, a witch doctor who frees his fellow victims from the psychic attack launched by demons of the outer and inner world.97

The "Griot", too, makes his presence felt in Reed's novels. The Griot is the traditional African oral story-teller who is the repository of the people's accumulated wisdom of the ages. He is a conjurer, too, of the black folk-culture. He has visions of reality. The stories are entertaining as well as lessons of "facts of life". "Loop" is the invulnerable energy sheltered by ritual and innumerable veils of nature from the prying eyes of the non-believers. "Legba" once loomed as the "procreative and primeval energy of all things" and his coming westward and surviving in the New World bears testimony to the fact that the black man, in spite of his
suffering, could not be stripped of his African heritage. "Loa" has the attributes and characteristics of the saints.

Convinced of the potency of HooDooism, Reed incorporates this symbology, taken from the African roots, into his metafictive literary creations to reveal the eclectic nature of HooDooism. He ranges through folk-lore and myth and views his writings as "wangas" or " Conjures" which provide corrective definitions of reality and are potent enough to bring real positive changes in this topsy-turvy world of ours. Yellow Black Radio Broke-Down, a Neo-HooDoo western and Mumbo Jumbo, a Neo-HooDoo detective novel, belong to this category.

The Free-Lance Pallbearers (1967), the first novel by Ishmael Reed, adjusts fictional art to mythic inception either through exaggerating or by diminishing the reality. Satirically he distorts the American reality into grotesque dimensions by concocting a pot-pourri of picaresque ingredients peppered with slang.

The most important characteristic of the book is the inventing of names and surnames full of derision and allusions like Eclair Porkchop, U 2 Polyglot, Nosetrouble, Elijah Raven.

The book opens with an attack on American society satirising the white and black attitudes. Vaudeville, jokes, surrealistic and bizarre words are used to paint an imaginary futuristic America -- familiar men and institutions dot the narrative. There are attacks
on socio-politic scenes in America. Reed wants to rend the veil of pretence and fine words behind which the corrupt and perverted individuals hide. He strains to deflate the American King Ubu, alias Nixon, who is at the helm of the ship of state which is rotten to the very holds. The main satiric thrust is at black novelists who write reams on the identity crisis. Their intricate and fashionable approaches to experimental writings are parodied. There is also the denunciation of the state-controlled communications.

The typical pseudo-autobiographical style is anathema to him. In *Invisible Man* Ralph Ellison builds the theme and structure of his novel on the grandfather's advice which Reed finds hilariously funny. Reed's protagonist Bukka Doopeyduck learns nothing of his identity thus adding credence to Reed's conviction that no one can know himself, what to speak of others. Visualising the present race situation in America, he opines, no one is entitled to speak to or on behalf of the black man. Corporate structure of Christian theology is also analysed threadbare and found wanting. Ultimately nemesis has her say and the persecuted triumph over the exploiters.

Reed wishes to create his writings in the tradition of the Afro-American folk-lore. Consequently, he uses a non-western form of satire to give expression to his unique outlook on life. He grafts various literary devices to create new techniques. His aim is to introduce a new "loa" in his writings and abandon the established genres.
The story begins like a fairy tale with dwarfs, ogre, old witch, magic phial and hero and then blends into a satire of American classics, to popular magazines, comics, movies and reminiscences.

Bukka Doopeyduck, the protagonist, relates his odyssey to the heart of whiteness only to find a landscape of barren blackness. Bukka is innocent, naive and blessed with a clear, discerning power to judge the right and the wrong. Like a Nazarene apprentice he is conscious of his social and professional obligations. But Bukka is hopelessly out of step with the times. He is straight but lives in a crooked country. His "Nazarene Manual" has inculcated in him a creed which is desperately old-fashioned. Consequently, he is betrayed by everyone, including the black men who join in swindling him out of his fortune and his innocence. Finally, he gets acquainted with the corrupt system but it is too late to change himself. He is crucified beneath a huge ball of human excrement. The metaphor of "shit" runs through the plot to define the theme of corruption in man and society, in life and letters. The monstrosity of America is unfolded gradually. As a narrator, Bukka speaks disparagingly of the black conventions and literary mode and interprets the black experience.

Bukka lives in the urban country of Harry Sam, a corrupt and perverted nation ruled by a dictator called Bag-of-Shit Sam. Sam stands under the protective charm of a ball-of-shit, his national
symbol. The topography of the country is very much like the interior of the human body with "long twisting corridors and passage ways descending to the very bowels of the earth."\textsuperscript{99}

The lavatory is located on top of Sam's Island. The mouth organ is a speech organ and entrance for food. It is linked to the anus. The anus discharges the half-digested matter which also gives strength to the individual.

... couched in the embankment are the four statues of RUTHERFORD BIRCHARDHAYES. White papers, busted microphones and other wastes leak from the lips of the bearded bedrock and end up in the bay fouling it so that no swimmer has emerged from its waters alive.\textsuperscript{100}

The septic tank is located in the Black Bay which lies at the summit of Sam's Island, "busted microphones" and "white papers" (government publications) are symbolic of the "prostituted state controlled communications". The four statues broadcast their foul and corrupt messages to the four corners of the earth, and as the mouth and anus are linked, so can the connection be drawn between the faces and mouth. Everything and everyone in the country of Harry Sam stinks.

Bag-of-shit Sam loves eating little children -- the corrupt system devours innocence. His second pastime is processing language into "toy talk" i.e. churning out propaganda of his goodness.
Gradually, language, knowledge and tradition are robbed of their relevance and have to be rejuvenated through novel ideas. Language needs to be revived and reviewed or it shackles creative thought. Bukka always distrusts the white man's "art speech" in the black man's voice.

U2 Polyglot, the Dean of the University where Bukka studied, is a spy sent out by Sam in the cultural war. In him, the metaphors of nose, speech and shit blend perfectly — he goes around the world pushing a ball of shit with his nose. Towards the end of the story when the Free-Lance Pallbearers come to lay Bukka's body to rest, they cannot get through because U2 Polyglot's ball of shit vitiates the whole atmosphere.

Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down (1969) is a mythical and musical impression expressed through literary Neo-Hoodooism. The title of the book is based upon a poem by Lorenzo Thomas called "Modern Plumbing Illustrated" published in a magazine, East Side Review, in 1966. Reed listened to some old radio scripts and then his imagination churned out the story of the novel. That is how the word "Radio" came to be incorporated in the title. Another reason is that the story has very little description or scenery; dialogue predominates like in stories broadcast on the radio. "Yellow Back" because Reed utilised the form of the American western about
cowboy heroes (they were yellow-back dime novels). "Broke Down" is the abbreviated version of "break it down" i.e. to analyse its basic components. The book develops the aesthetics of Neo-HooDoo.

The setting of the Yellow Back Radio, a pioneer town, in a psychic world where the past, present and future are blended into time. You can imagine it anywhere in time between 10,000 B.C. and 1970 A.D. There is a black cowboy hero, child murdering parents and nineteen century Indians flying helicopters. Reed disparages the frontier myth, the capitalistic ethics and parents who prefer to see the death of their children rather than the death of their out-worn values. The mythic conflict of Osiris and Set is woven in the texture of the story and the whole of American tradition is demystified.

Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down ... is not merely a satire on the old west, with a black cowboy as the hero, is not merely a parable about the contemporary black struggle vis-a-vis the white establishment; it is not merely a parody on the annexation fight between the Union and the territory of Texas, it is not merely a realistic account of the slime, genocide, corruption, degeneracy and hypocrisy that infest American history and every institution and motive in our national fibre: Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down is All these things, and more .... As a poet and novelist Reed has the imagination of a psychopath who is God, or who is Satan Himself - ghosts Voo-doo, rattle snakes, rites, hoo-doo, superstition, multiple schizophrenia, beasts, meta-psychosis, demons, visions .... Reed is not mad, he is supersane, it is America that is mad.101
Yellow Back Radio is a town which is in the throes of a painful struggle between the parents and their children. The children feel they have been exploited by their parents for too long, they have been made to do all the work, they just cannot endure the parents' high-handed behaviour any more. They rebel, consequently, they drop hallucinogen in their drinks and chase them out of the town. Drag Gibson (Set in the myth), a cow-boy dictator, the richest cattleman in the west, who takes delight in sadomasochism steps forward in this imbroglio and offers to overpower the naughty, impudent kids and establish the old status quo. In return for the favour rendered, he wants the town turned over to him.

At this point Loop Garo Kid, the mythic hero, a Negro cowboy, rides into town. He is a voodoo worker with a cleft foot and far dangerous an adversary than Nat Love or Deadwood Dick. In the very first sentence of the novel Reed introduces us to the Kid, "Folks. This here is the story of the Loop Garo Kid. A cowboy so bad that made a working posse of spells phone in sick". Loop is represented in the zany surrealistic world as the crafty, potent black magician inherently active in the mythic history of the blacks. We discover that Kid is Lucifer and Drag, besides being Set, he is also the Church -- organised religion in America. The elements of fragmentation, the colloquial black English which serves as a stylistic device and not as language at all, are modes of cosmic satire in the book.
The HooDoo cowboy defeats Drag's nefarious designs and chases him out of town. Meanwhile, the Pope has heard of the outbreak of witchcraft by the Black Osiris figure i.e. Loop Garo Kid. The Pope has not come for a confrontation with the Kid but to acquaint Gibson and the white reader of the Kid's enduring powers. They may be arrayed in opposite camps but the ideology is the same -- one is white anti-Christ, the other is black anti-Christ. When the Pope extends his hand in friendship, the Kid spurns it and declares,

That's me the cosmic jester. Matter of fact, I've always been harmless -- St. Nicholas coming down the chimney, children leaving soup for me -- always made to appear foolish, the scapegoat of all history.102

Then the Kid drives the Pope out of the town.

Although the English language has basically equated the expression mumbo jumbo with "gibberish" the etymology which Reed provides derives from a Mandingo term, relating to a process which calms the troubled spirits. Ironically, at the same time the words lost their original meaning. They took on a meaning which troubled the spirits of the whites, invoking the fearful statistic vision of the dark continent that Africa inspired in the west.103

*Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) is the best exposition of the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic, rebirth of a black spiritual mythic, rebirth of a black spiritual mythic vision, into fiction. Neo-HooDoo springs from the ancient myths of Egypt, the rituals of the West Indian Magic and the...
power of necromancy of black people. Historic allusions, fantasy, photographs, collages, handwritten texts are held together with myth and satire. The book probes into the mysteries of the known and the unknown and has scholastic references and detailed bibliography of one hundred and four entries. It is a guide for contemporary black consciousness aiming to discover its origins.

The book is primarily a historic narrative concentrated on the mythic time of the twenties when the Harlem Renaissance was revolutionising the black mind and black literature. It was for the first time that the black artist tried his hand at adapting the black idiom in his literary works and deciphering the mystique of the oral tradition.

I wanted to write about a time like the present, or to use the past to prophecy about the future -- a process our ancestors called 'Necromancy'. I chose the 20's because that period was very similar to what's happening now. This is a valid method and has been used by writers from time immemorial using a past event of one's country or culture to comment on the present.

Among other things, the book is a tragi-comical review of the situation and environment of the twenties; it conjectures the failure of "Jes Grew" in retaining its potency and attempts to chalk out a programme for the survival of "Jes Grew" as a power. "Jes Grew" is an innovative sacred energy of the Harlem Renaissance and stands for joy and rhythm in the black spirit. Reed says it is an energy in
search of a form by means of which it can survive — the artist must supply it. "Jes Grew" failed to reach pandemic proportions and failed in the twenties to change the face of America because the literary art of Harlem Renaissance did not possess the dimensions to contain its powers. The black artists tried to embody its characteristics in the liturgical forms of the white tradition and failed.

Mumbo Jumbo is a detective thriller with a protest element in it. Papa La Bas is an aging "houngan" and remembers the tradition of "Jes Grew" and its origin in the Osirian legend. He is a detective entrusted with the task of finding the key to the phenomenon that is recurring in New Orleans. The phenomenon is an eruption of "Jes Grew", a black cultural impulse, a spontaneous dance, an awakening of the Osirian-Dionysian consciousness in the dark minds.

The story revolves around the conspiracy of "The Wall Flower Order of the Knights Templar" to weaken "Jes Grew," to dilute its black energy and subsequently debase it. Their efforts are fended off by the Mu' tafikah (a brotherhood of cultural subversives). Black gangsters led by Buddy Jackson and Black artists by Claude McKay, Abdul Hamid and Papa La Bas.

As "Jes Grew" sweeps across the nation, the people who come within the pale of its influence are unable to live in accordance with the precepts of the American society and strain to be free. In the
Osirian legend when people are caught in the frenzy of the "Dance" they begin to neglect their duties. An artist then goes to Osiris.

He calls on Osiris one day and argued his theory that the outbreak occurred because mysteries had no text to turn to. No litany to feed the spirits that were seizing the people, and that if Osiris would execute these dance steps for Thoth he would illustrate them and then the Osirian priest could determine what God or spirit possessed them as well as learn how to make these Gods and spirits depart.105

The book contains a number of texts and the most important of them is in the Book of Thoth -- a sacred text which is never revealed. "So Jes Grew is seeking its words. Its text. For what good is liturgy without text."106


Papa La Bas is a detached commentator who realises that his obsession with voodoo and necromancy has distanced him from 'Jes Grew' (Reed caricatures Carl Van Vechten as Hinkle Von Vamptor). Carl Van Vechten was a white writer who patronised the black artists. His book Nigger Heaven emphasised the primitivistic vision of the Harlem Renaissance. Hinkle Von Vampton, the Templer, was assigned the job of corrupting Jes Grew with parasitic forms and finally
suppressing it. La Bas with his discerning eye recognises Von Hampton as an agent of Set, the rival who assassinated Osiris. La Bas is shocked out of his obsession and takes up cudgels to defend "Jes Grew." He jumps into every fray that erupts in the plot. Each story presents a different perspective, interpreting "Jes Grew" from its own point of view. The diversities of these stories and differing interpretations enable Reed to dabble in myth and help him to bring out the complexities of the Harlem Renaissance. Abdul Hamid, the Egyptologist, who had the Book of Thoth, burns it and we see for what he is—a cynical small-hearted and narrow-minded man who has not understood the needs of the black people. The Harlem Revolutionaries visit New York and negotiate with Papa La Bas.

Papa La Bas and Von Vampton make a search for the Book of Thoth for different reasons. Papa La Bas narrates the history of the Neo-HooDoo and emphasises the importance of the text. At the end, he asserts that here is every likelihood that "Jes Grew" will return, for "Time is a pendulum", he declares, "Not a river. More akin to what goes around comes round."\(^{107}\)

Reed succeeds in his aim in making us realise the great role the blacks have played in the creation of American culture. Vodoun, the secret culture, the metaphysical system, has nurtured the black man in America.

The Last Days of Louisiana Red\(^ {108}\) (1974) is a mock-heroic
epic following the same mythological pattern as Mumbo Jumbo. This book, too, is a detective thriller. The techniques of burlesque, parody, the vaudeville, cartoon, caricature and capacity to move at different levels makes it an interesting book with a whole gamut of social interaction -- there is a blending of history, politics, corporate Christianity, religion, mythology of ancient Egypt and Greece, pyrotechnics, scathing social commentary, folklore etc. The words are juggled to create artistic, symbolic and psychic patterns. Ishmael Reed's language is so impressive and convincing that when he described "Louisiana Red" as "a potent and pungent 'sauce', this spell was so seriously mistaken by the manufacturers of 'Tabasco Sauce' that they thought he was trying to put them out of Business; and sought an injunction on the sale of the book."  

The metaphor of "Louisiana Red" is a "pungent sauce" symbolising a frenzy which causes infighting and dissensions in a group. It is an eponym like "Jes Grew" which pervades the pages of Mumbo Jumbo. It is also a pepper sauce and an "evil half wit octroon woman steeped in HooDoo". It implies a psychic feeling; figuratively, it is a baneful and baleful attitude of the mind which instigates the black people to fight amongst themselves, as Reed says, "the way they related to each other, oppressed one another, maimed and murdered one another ...."

The Last Days of Louisiana Red is the story of two generations of a black family -- the Yellings. Ed Yellings is the founder of
the Solid Gumbo Works, a hot be-pop-argot sauce factory, a business that uses spells and charms to combat the evils of "Louisiana Red". The scientists in the factory are doing research on drugs that could cure cancer and also prove to be an antidote to chronic drug addiction. Riffling through the pages of ancient sciences they come upon a recipe derived from ancient New Orleans Voodoo mixtures.

Doc John cured cancer by using stale bread, ginger root soaked in sweet oil, black berry tea and powdered cat's eyes and making a pill of these elements.... Louisiana Red Corporation learned through a spy who had access to Ed's papers... that he was on the brink of a cure for heroin addiction -- a cure that would keep the victim off heroin for ever. That's when they ordered their three spies to kill Ed.\(^{110}\)

Louisiana Red Corporation, an international organisation of villains, murders Ed Yellings to take over the manufacture of "Gumbo" a mysterious drug with healing powers developed through black magic and voodoo. Before Ed Yellings can take out the patent, the greedy and dangerous gangsters kill him. Two of Ed's children grow up into failures -- it is not surprising, for the tensions, frustrations, mistaken aims in life, misinformation, misfortune and ignorance that form the backdrop of black urban society are not conducive to the development of a balanced personality. The two children join a number of liberation oriented movements but ultimately feel cheated.

Papa La Bas, Reed's renowned hoodoo necromancer and occult detective is called upon to solve Ed Yellings' murder. Papa La Bas
is symbolic of Elegber or Exu, the first "loa" to be summoned in voodoo's magical rituals — the opener of the way.

Eventually, Papa La Bas is stricken with the symptoms of Louisiana Red. His informant Hamadryas, the baboon, is likewise affected. He tries to overcome the plague by acts of charity but falls a prey to 'Antigone,' an epidemic similar to "Louisiana Red" but with a distinctively sexual predilection. The deadly "Antigone" is incarnated as Ms Better-weather, executive secretary at Solid Gumbo Works, who uses her feminine wiles to ensnare him and then use him as an agent to free Minnie, a leader of the Moochers (representative of corrupt effects of "Louisiana Red") from the treacherous power of the male chauvinist Hell. Finally, Papa La Bas is duped. Hamadryas, who originally sprang as an agent of the wise and gentle "loa," attacks his zookeeper and is turned into a horse and a carrier of "Louisiana Red".

The book is a vicious attack on a number of establishment values. Reed denounces vehemently the distorted perspective of the black liberation organisations of the sixties; he parodies Eldridge Cleaver, The Panthers, Angela Davis, the editors of Black Scholar and black elected officials. He scorns the "New Left" which he thinks is made up of spineless dregs of humanity.

Reed's views on many topics are distorted and antediluvian. Women arouse his contempt.
La Bas accuses all black women as conspirators with white men in keeping black men in submission .... Papa La Bas intones .... The original blood sucking vampire was a woman.111

Referring to the stories of the Greeks involving chorus and mythic background of Antigone and the Seven Against Thebes, Reed creates a design showing the disorder, then and at present, in black life in particular and American life in general. He satirically attacks forces he feels make life difficult for blacks and whites.

Reed's satire wishes to act as a corrective -- he desires to rescue the blacks from social defeatism and wants them to inculcate the age-old virtues of self-reliance, perseverance, struggle against the disorder in day-to-day life and march towards freedom. His injunctions are clear but not very palatable to many.

There is absolutely no trace of protest in the whole narrative. Reed, in fact, expresses a desire to do away with inter-racial distrust, misunderstanding and violence.

*Flight to Canada* (1976). This novel by Ishmael Reed is again devoid of all protest

Mr Reed's targets include members of all races, not omitting his own black race, which his books repeatedly present as needing to resist being divided and conquered through such means as accepting others' images of blackness.113
The book abounds in exciting comic imagination and spins yarns with a free play of fantasy, fancy and spontaneity. The line between fact and fiction is blurred and time is not immured in capsules. The past and the present are snipped together to depict uncanny anachronisms.

Yes, our time as well as Lincoln's. For, in this book the assassination at Ford's Theatre is callously covered by TV, for example, and Mr Reed has blended the periods as if history existed all at once instead of in the fetters of time.

The Lincoln in the book is neither the patriarch of the nation as given out by his supporters nor the villain depicted by his opponents -- he is merely a good-natured man who is confused by the tangle of circumstances. The slaves in the book travel by Air Canada or by the Grey Hound Bus network. Throughout the book there are scenes which alternate between the plantation in Virginia where the hero was a slave and then shift on to his state of freedom. Folk-lore, mythology, caricature--all are churned together to create a brilliant, outrageous exploration of slavery. The book is wonderfully entertaining.

*Flight to Canada* was influenced by the slave narratives, incidents and scenes from the lives of the writers of slave narratives. But Reed's perspective of exploring the history of slavery is genuinely funny, for he adopts a posture antithetical to
the maudlin story writers like Harriet B. Stowe etc. There is nothing bitter about his book and after going through it one is not convulsed by guilt pangs, or swamped by sympathy, pity or fear, for the slave was not as helpless and exploited as was made out by vested interests.

In this book the slaves put down each other, in no less obvious ways than their masters do, and one of the fugitives finally discloses that he ran away not only from the slave master but from other slaves too.\textsuperscript{115}

The runaway slaves were no better than their slave masters. Human nature under the black skin and white skin is universal.

The runaway black ex-slaves are barely more virtuous than the evil slave master Swille. One of them for instance, a former chicken thief, now earns his living making porno pictures and offering himself through newspaper ads as a slave - for - a - day.\textsuperscript{116}

Ishmael refuses to be a spokesman for his race. His slaves are not liberated by the Great Emancipation, but liberate themselves. Slavery, the South, Canada, Reed says, are attitudes of the mind. The physical boundaries and abstract concepts do not exist in time or space. Just as the country of Canada can be anywhere on this earth so can slaves, slave masters, plantations be anywhere. With subtelty he draws symbolically a connection between self-enslavement and a selfish impulse in man to enslave others — those who do not assert themselves become slaves of those who do. With this novel,
Reed has destroyed the stereotype historians and novelists who have painted in lurid and garish colours the degradation of the slaves.

A collage of the Civil War is constructed by overlapping and blending the past with the present. The main character of the story is Raven Quickskill, a black slave, who manages to give the slip to his master, Arthur Swille and holes up in Emancipation City to elude his master. When the war ends, he flees to Canada. Thereafter, there is a war of wits between Raven Quickskill and Arthur Swille. The master makes several futile bids to bring his slave to heel and vows to capture him. Quickskill is equally determined to live a free man. In a letter from Canada, he writes, "Ain't no use you slave catchers waiting on me at Trailways, I won't be there."

The runaway slave cannot come back to his country till his former master is dead and buried, for Quickskill knows that his master will fulfil his promise of tracking him down.

Inspired by the murals of Orozco, Ishmael Reed has created *The Terrible Two* (1982), a surrealistic, social, realist, proletariat novel. He is prompted by the underlying idea that people in the United States are prosperous, successful and live in very favourable surroundings but instead of counting their blessings, are testy, peevish, fretful and constantly punching holes — in fact, their behaviour is not very much different from the pampered and spoilt two year olds. One can read the book as a Christmas story, too.
Throughout his writing career, Reed conducted a relentless campaign against convention, orthodoxy and tradition within the world of black art and with the political fundamentalists. He is radically opposed to the narrow-minded racism of black nationalists and pretentious communalism that dominates the ethnic scenario. Desiring to construct bridges across various schisms that exist in the society, he intermingles the various genres in his writings to recount the total desecration of innocence by the hydra-headed, inexorable system of ideologies. He condemns the crime-infested under-world which makes street thugs out of honest citizens and turns them into violent law breakers. Satire is Reed's forte and his hold over the intricacies of the parody is well illustrated in The Terrible Two as he brilliantly lampoons the whole gamut of human relationships.

In The Terrible Two all these ideas find place. In addition, he re-affirms his views against politicising the individual; he refuses to submit to demagogues; his anathema to Marxism is explicitly recorded and he warns against threat of cultural imperialism. The monotheistic western world refuses to concede third world values and creativity -- this will ultimately bode ill for the aesthetic and esthetic systems. Vitality in the world of letters and social affairs can be infused by blending the ancient and the modern.
"Just as he used Antigone in the Last Days of Louisiana Red to create a brilliant satire that collapsed under the strain of its near misogyny and just as he used the western for the Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down, the detective story for Mumbo Jumbo, the slave narrative and Uncle Tom's Cabin for Flight to Canada Reed weaves Rastafricanism and a reverse of Todd Clifton's dummy sequence from the Invisible Man with Dicken's A Christmas Carol in The Terrible Two. 118

The novel is a mixture of political commentary, legal historical analysis, irony, third world consciousness, pure rage, a good amount of goodwill. At times Reed stops his story, gives a brief resume of what has gone before and begins again with renewed impetus thus enlivening the plot. His stick figures are infused with a vigorous psychedelic dance of life. His artistry of sculpturing and collaging of various models of techniques and far-reaching inventive thoughtstream comes up with skittishly stirring situations that keep the mind in a flurry. His explorations in the realm of the unknown give his story an adventurous hue.

The story of The Terrible Two is a slap in "the face of the bosses and the sub zero people, the heartless Scrooges."

There is nothing subtle about Reed's satire. He has satirised everything under the sun. Nothing escapes his hawk eye, nothing is sacrosanct. His satirical strokes are like the blows from a sledge-hammer. He does not believe in coating the pill.
The book is the story of President Clift who journeys downwards into the underworld. During his pergrinations he encounters two past Presidents of the United States, Truman and Rockfeller. They know no peace; they are restless, disturbed and unsettled because of memories of their past misdeeds perpetrated against the human beings while on earth. This behaviour is bizarre, grotesque and unrestrained by any norms -- Reed makes them look farcical and absurd -- Truman's ghost cannot sleep a wink; he is obsessed with the horror of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. He had ordered the dropping of the atom bombs on these cities in Japan. He is terror-stricken that if he sleeps he will have nightmares of processions of Japanese faces made appallingly frightening by the effects of the bombs -- twisted and convulsed figures with the skin peeling and gaping holes where the eyes, noses and ears should be, human beings with scarcely any trace of humanity -- all trooping past his vision.

Rockfeller is condemned to restlessness for his role in the Attica uprisings and is taunted on the manner of his death. The poor, the down-trodden and the deprived may find some cold solace in reading the discomfitures of the privileged and Reed's inclination towards their (the poorman's) cause, but the "Fat Cats" (the privileged class) will act like the proverbial duck on who's back not a drop stays. Nonchalantly blasé, they might go through the whole narrative, enjoying Reed's humour at their expense, without batting an eyelid in embarrassment.
The book is an expose of the travails and trials of the common man in day-to-day life. There are, in the book, the obsessed harpies, the Indians in the Christian missions, the corruption of Christianity, the black hero who appropriates a white form, the dumb black street hustlers who get embroiled in petty crimes without really understanding that they are indulging in breaking civil and social laws, the social system that nurtures the bad, the ugly and the vicious and then swallows the individual in its vortex; the arbitrary power of the white bosses, the black hero flailing helplessly in the quagmire of 'women problems' and the common erroneous belief that old traditions are just as good as the new-fangled ideas with a lot of meretricious show.

19 Necromancers from Now is an anthology of writings edited by Reed. It is quite a famous book, for the introduction is quite enlightening regarding the writer's thoughtstream. The writers represented are Afro-American black writers, Indo-American, Chinese-Americans -- writers hitherto neglected by the publishers. Reed has found them fit to be included in the anthology for various reasons -- they have potential of necromancers, are members of the Neo-HooDoo movement and write in an ultra-absurdist vein.

Another distinguishing feature of these writers is that they have completely deviated from the western literary form, from convention, from conformism and from the monolithic passivity. There
is diversity in style and literary modes and a lot of experimentation with different forms. There is

Fantasy, Nationalism, Supernatural Hoodooism, Realism, Science Fiction, Autobiography, Satire, Scat Erotica, Rock, K.C. Blues, International Intrigue, Jazz and a few styles and genres that defy definition -- all are here. Harlem, California, East Village, Copenhagen, Croton-on-Hudson, Mars, Jupiter, are all here. Indian people, Black People, White People, Chinese People and Blue People unravel their experiences through its pages.

Reed succeeded in drawing attention to the writings of those little known writers. Soon after the anthology appeared, publishers sought out those writers and picked up their writings. Reed had succeeded in his aim.

Ishmael Reed is a novelist but he is a poet of repute, too. He has four collections of poetry to his credit. Black oriented poems with a Black Aesthetic Neo-Hoodooism is his speciality. As a poet, Ishmael Reed thrills his readers with a surge of allusions and puns, notions and conceptions, swirling on rhythm and mingling the elements. He speaks fast in a staccato style and ideas compressed in telegraphic language. His frolicsome fancy plays fast and loose with themes; he creates his own myths and evokes with poetic realism the satire in black humour while exploring the Afro-American tradition. His innovative mind rebels at the thought of being straitjacketed in the conventions of language. He questions the value and logicality of American standards which he considers
obsolete in the contemporary age. In his poems he synthesises kaleidoscopically Black American folk-lore, black American language tradition, African language and African myths. His poems give a distinctive view of Afro-American culture. His poems, set to a racy pace, are often very funny and evoke gurgling laughter. He refuses to be constrained by relevance of themes. Beneath his frisky themes and playful outrageousness we have a very committed man who has the heart of a moralist.

His collections of verse are generously peppered with Hoodoo which is the vitalising factor in black culture. There is mixing of the traditional ballad form and Afro-American speech. The black man is trapped in two conceptions of history, the linear and the mythic.

REED IN HIS POEMS IS AT THE STREET LEVEL where the action is. There is no one poem in Chattanooga as lively as "I am a Cow Boy in the Boat of Ra" but some have the same engaging mixture of mythology, history (part Black history) folk-lore, literary references and hip street argot — Reed is not really experimental as he at first seems. His poems read fast, are often very funny ... have a readability that should appeal to the general reading public.
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