CHAPTER V

Faith on Trial

In July 1957, at the age of thirty seven, Baldwin was prompted by the Black Revolution to return home— to the country he had vowed "never, never" to return. While in France, he had been disturbed by gnawings of guilt for his lack of involvement in the desperate and frenetic struggle against injustice his people were engaged in at home.

On return to the United States, he was favourably impressed by the great upheaval in the intellectual, emotional, psychological and social spheres of Negro activity. He noticed a new assertiveness, a new sense of racial pride, identity and confidence, which bolstered the Negro psyche. A revolutionary fervour, woefully lacking in earlier times, gripped the Negro mind. Baldwin was engaged by Look, an American magazine, to make an on-the-spot evaluation of the social and political situation in the deep South. He crossed the Mason-Dixon line in the autumn of that year. He was overwhelmed by the cruel inadequacies of the American social and political systems prevailing there. He discovered that "Blackness" was a mark of pain and suffering. Deeply moved, he felt the Negro artist could not honestly ignore the struggle for the civil rights. Till then, he had been an avowed integrationist and had aspired for universality in his writings. His ideal had been total integration in the American
mainstream. After his visit to the South he felt compelled to make a choice between his social values and artistic responsibility. Reflecting on his fundamental assumptions of the previous years, he felt obliged to radically change his deeply-felt beliefs. He remembered, "I suppose the depth of my own involvement began then." 1

James Baldwin had begun his literary career by asserting very categorically that energy was wasted in conflict; he felt disinclined to write in the Protest Tradition; he felt protest in his writings would damage his integrity as a writer. But greatly disturbed by the social climate in the sixties, he changed his viewpoint — he realised the old themes had to be abandoned, for the writing on the wall was clear. He lost faith in the theme of religion, in practice, he found Christianity was devoid of love and in his opinion, love was the only emotion that could unite humanity and bring about the salvation of man.

During the sixties, LeRoi Jones emerged as the chief propounder of the Black Arts Movement and he advised black writers to write like "... a black man talking to other black men, not talking simply to an audience of middle class credit-card carrying whites." 2

Jones further contended that hate was a natural consequence of being black in America. Baldwin differed because he believed
that hate destroyed but love made bridges of understanding and communication. Despite persuasion from many quarters, he refused to align himself with the Black Arts Movement. He did not want to follow the white literary trends current at that time, either. He rejected the white literary tradition as it was too "complacent and apathetic" and tended to create delusions that all was well with the world. His artistic philosophy inclined towards prefigurative literary tradition — he admonished America to heed the warning of the black social revolution which could have serious repercussions for America and for Americans.

The tone of his writings changed to militancy. His re-assessment and speculations are reflected in his writings. Nobody Knows My Name (1961) and The Fire Next Time (1963) contain grave warnings and advise the white men to love without concern for colour and race. His novels, Another Country (1962) and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone (1968), are bitter indictments of American society.

Another Country (1962). The book contains a number of plots interwoven to depict the desires and aspirations of the characters. Search for love, identity, security, fulfilment of ambition, interpersonal relationships are collaged to graphically detail the individual's right to live with dignity and self-respect. Baldwin pleads for deeper understanding amongst human beings irrespective of race, class and sex considerations.
Another Country is the first novel Baldwin wrote on coming back to America. The change in his political stance is reflected towards problems of race and racial interaction. The book "contains far more social protest than any of the preceding novels" of James Baldwin. Racial problems crop up, in Baldwin's opinion because people ignore their basic human nature and shape and decipher social values for their selfish designs. Love is absent in human interaction and this absence of love creates problems in interpersonal relationships. Baldwin asserts, "I think love is the only wisdom".

All the characters in the novel are engaged in a lonely, futile quest for love and satisfying relationships. In Another Country love is not prejudiced but transcends all man-made barriers. Love expressed through sex, Baldwin thinks, is an instrument for exploring the complexity of another human being; sex can become a vehicle to communicate the hopes, aspirations, expectations and acceptations of the inner being, sex can forge a unity in society by ignoring trivial terms which denote divisions like man-woman, black-white, hetero-homo-bi sexuality. Sexual explorations are carried out with the serious intention of finding the right alliance. For example, Vivaldo has a number of sex encounters -- with a white girl, with a black girl, then with a white man, and finally settles for a black girl. Eric has sex with a white woman, a black man, a white man and then settles
with a white homosexual, Yves. Every one exercises his preference for the sex partner. Vivaldo refuses to have sex with Harold, who accosts him in the bar, but makes advances to Eric. Rufus has sex with Eric but declines the overtures of a man in the bar. Choice of alternatives is made according to the spiritual and physical needs after a protracted self-analysis.

Towards homosexuality Baldwin has a very positive attitude and treats it as a normal and natural activity leading to love and fulfilment. It is a mature relationship cultivated in preference to other viable alternatives. The act raises the male characters to exquisite moments of self-realisation. Being a definite experience it is imbued with love and purity. Though these mutually satisfying phallic associations are transitory, they take one "towards Bethlehem", towards happiness and fulfilment. Vivaldo and Eric know their relationship cannot last but they get real pleasure from each other while the relationship lasts.

Heterosexual love transforms the man and woman to animal level. Baldwin's men may indulge in heterosexual love at times but most of them eventually prefer phallic experience for physical and spiritual gratification. Characters who are bisexual find heterosexual love physically passionate but spiritually empty. Eric settles with Yves even though he knows there are no obligations or commitments in the relationship.
The book is soused in love and yet strangely each character is running in search of "the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow." Paradoxically, the characters do come across it but do not find fulfillment in it. Rufus and Leona seek love from each other but there is a tragic end to their love—Leona becomes mad and Rufus commits suicide. Vivaldo and Ida love each other yet they fight like a cat and dog in each other's arms. Cass leaves her aristocratic home in New England to marry Richard, a Polish carpenter's son, but finds only disillusionment in the relationship. Baldwin would probably shake his head and say, "This is the way of the heterosexual world." Eric recognizes his identity as a homosexual and assuages his pain through acceptance of that identity—so he lives in Paradise.

Besides the pursuit of love, the characters are engaged in discovering their identity and a metaphor for "self-definition". A frantic search is being made for answers to questions which plague them and alienate them from themselves, from others and from life itself, but no answers are forthcoming. Each character is enveloped in obscurity and anonymity, groping for a sense of "self" but is hampered by limitations imposed by his culture—either he is a Negro who has found acceptability amongst white friends but not the white world; or he is a white man who has found fulfillment in loving his Negro friends. The white man can never merge in the black world and for that matter neither can the black man find acceptance in the white world.
The power of music is another metaphor that runs through the book as an evocative and emotive force. Blistering Jazz music and doleful Bessie Smith "Blues" express the pain that is gnawing at the very vitals of the Negro. Music has always been the Negro mode of communicating the agony of the soul. It is an internal part of the character and thought-stream of the black man.

The folk music of the Negro has profound significance for Baldwin. It delineates his identity as a Negro and an American.

For the first time Baldwin introduces racism and protest in his fiction. In the sex acts between the black man, Rufus, and the white woman, Leona, and between the white man, Vivaldo, and the black woman, Ida, the relationships take on a perverse racial hue. Instead of love-making the act becomes a combat of racial psyches. As Rufus and Leona reach the climax, "A moan and a curse tore through him while he beat her with all the strength he had." Rufus has grown up in the ghetto and has encountered oppression, denial, prejudice and adverse reaction because he has a black skin. Rufus hates the white society, for he has experienced the white brutality of the policeman, the landlord, the elevator boy, the shopkeeper and the army— all heaped innumerable humiliations on him.

He loves Leona but vents his pent up anger against the white society by cruelly treating her. He calls her a "milk white bitch"
at the height of love-making. In the violence and brutality we read his desire to punish her and through her, the entire white race. Every sex act of his is a murderous assault on her.

He wanted her to remember him the longest day she lived. And shortly nothing could have stopped him, not the white God Himself, nor a lynch mob arriving on wings. Under his breath he cursed the milk white bitch...

The affair ends in tragedy when Leona suffers a nervous breakdown. Her brother takes her away but before going he spits full in Rufus' face to show his contempt. The tragedy could have been averted if Rufus had understood himself and Leona and transcended the colour line which divided them.

Ida and Vivaldo love each other but in white society they have to hear cries of outrage and jeers of disdain when they move about together. They encounter the ubiquitous policeman, who is ready to bring down his club on anyone trespassing beyond the conventional black-white relationship. The social dimensions of racial reaction bog love into a quagmire of complicated problems.

Rufus, a black character, meets failure in life and commits suicide. Eric, another important character, is white and attains success — one might assume the failure and the success to be emblematic of the failure and success of the respective races. Eric, the white actor, is redeemed when he gives an outlet to
his aspirations through acting but Rufus is black and nobody is ready to hear of his pain through his art, that is, music. The code for living in society of the two races is different though they live in the same country. Yves is the only character in the book who is free of racial and sexual hang-ups. The reason probably is he lives in "Another Country" i.e. France.

The theme of isolation pervades the story. Each man is an island in himself. Rufus is separated from his family and his conventional world by his unconventional way of living. Race separates him from Leona. Cass is isolated because she renounces her family to marry Richard, who in turn has rejected his Polish heritage to pursue fame. Eric is walled in by his homosexuality, Ida is estranged from her parents because they disapprove of her going in for white sex partners. Vivaldo, the novelist, is groping for moorings. All these characters have left their conventional worlds but are yet to find a foothold in the new world they have chosen for themselves.

There are six main characters in the book -- all are physically passionate, promiscuous and lusty but spiritually and morally sterile. Their fates and fortunes criss-cross to weave the story of Another Country. Their complex relationships provide an opportunity to Baldwin to examine a wide variety of social problems. Most of the social interaction takes place in the
spiritually and morally bankrupt concrete jungle of New York.

Rufus Scott, a Negro drummer, is the nave of the plot and even though he dies early in the story, his presence hovers over the pages of the book and gives direction to the behaviour of the other characters. Rufus is a tragic victim of personal and social forces which imbrue his nature with violence and brutality. All the social vices which conventional society frowns upon are indulged in by him -- he drinks, is high on drugs, abuses, is ill-tempered, mordant, waspish and has a surfeit of the sex urge. On the whole, he is a very unpleasant character.

Rufus is symbolic of the thousands of his race who ultimately succumb to the oppressive designs of the white social order. Survival depends on recognition and acceptance of inferior position. Fighting within himself the real and imaginary fears of racial prejudice, he yearns to go to "another country", "where a man could be treated like a man."

Fed on perverted values of white society he feels demoralised when he has to compromise his ideals at every step. He is consumed with rage when he realises that all the good things in life are for the white man who can dream and realise his dreams. The black man cannot even dream,
You find yourself in a slum and you realise at the certain point that no amount of labour, no amount of hard work, no amount of soap is going to get you out of that slum.

His earliest memory is of being dragged out of the garbage-filled Hudson river by his father, in which symbolically he consigns himself finally.

Through flash-backs and recollections we get to know that Rufus grows up in Harlem, the apple of his parents' eye and a hero of his sister, Ida. In Harlem, he has trouble with his family, his adolescent neighbours and the law. He leaves home in disgust.

When we first come across him, he is out of work, penniless, homeless and feeling very "Blue". The intensity of his loneliness is depicted when he hears the saxophone player blowing a question repeatedly at his audience. "Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?" And again, "Do you love me?" The boy seems hurt, bitter and irreparably damaged by a harsh necessity to survive in an uncaring world. Rufus identifies his plight with that of the saxophone player — he, too, has very often asked this question and received no answer.

Through another flashback we learn of Leona, a waitress from the "white trash environment" of the South, who has the answer to his question, "Do you love me?" She also has suffered in life. Leaving her child in the South, she has come to the North
in search of love. She throws in her lot with Rufus but he cannot accept or return her love. He is weighed down by centuries old hatred and fear. Pain has branded his psyche. In his mind she is symbolic of the white race, so he feels a compulsion to debase and destroy her. Misinterpreting love for sexual gratification, he makes her the butt of his contempt and brutally mistreats her. During their love-making he curses her viciously -- thinking she is an intrusion in his life from the white world.

He wanted her to remember him the longest day she lived. And shortly nothing could have stopped him, not the white god himself, nor a lynch mob arriving on wings. Under his breath he cursed the milk white bitch and groaned .... A moan and a curse tore through him while he beat her with all the strength he had .... 13

She makes desperate and concerted efforts to reach his heart but they prove ineffective, "I love him, I can't help it. No matter what he does to me. He's just lost .... 14 He's lost his "selfhood", his identity and his confidence to communicate with her. Finally, she has a nervous breakdown.

Strangely enough, Rufus has a number of white friends. After wandering aimlessly, a shattered, filthy, homeless Rufus seeks refuge in Vivaldo's apartment and relates the story of his life. He speaks of Leona, his craving for sex and his homosexual urges. While Rufus is speaking, Vivaldo puts on a Bessie Smith "Blue"
which charges the whole atmosphere in keeping with the
soul-stirring revelations which Rufus makes.

There’s thousands of people, Bessie now sang,
ain’t got no place to go ... 'cause my house
fell down and I cant live here no mo' ....\textsuperscript{15}

Rufus accompanies Vivaldo to Benno’s bar where they meet
Cass and Richard Silenski. There is a silent communication of
gazes and gestures and Rufus feels that Cass cares. Immediately
his drooping spirits are uplifted and he feels optimistic that his
world will change. Despair soon returns when Cass and Richard
leave. Their empty chairs signify his loneliness and isolation.
He walks out of the bar, through the city streets, into the garbage
filled Hudson river, demanding of God, “Ain’t I your body too?”

At his funeral, his friends play his favourite hymn “I’m a
stranger, don’t drive me away”. Even after death his spirit hovers
over the men and women who knew him. Cass accompanies Vivaldo
to the funeral and sees for the first time the world which had
spawned Rufus and realises there could have been no escape from
the prison in which Rufus lived. Examining her life in the light
of the new realisation she understands that one should discover
and then accept one’s inner “being”. Vivaldo thoughtfully broods
over his failure as a novelist and his failure as a friend to Rufus.
He recalls meeting Ida as a young girl. With a new-found interest
in her, he takes her to a party and then to his apartment. Eric is
well acquainted with the tragic life of Rufus. He is determined not to make the same mistakes which Rufus made.

Eric is a white actor from a well-to-do family, originally from the South, in the United States but settled in France. He is the only character in the book, who has, in some measure, made a success of his life. He has grown up in Alabama. He had a lonely childhood, for he seemed different from other boys of his age and background. Quite early in life, he is initiated into homosexuality. Being honest, he accepts himself as he is, without bothering to hide behind a conventional facade of life. He goes to France, to "another country", to live as he wants, with his boyfriend, Yves.

Because he infuses confidence in his friends, they, both men and women, repose their trust in him. He is bi-sexual with the homosexual urge predominating. This is probably the reason why there is no conflict between him and the people around him. He has sex with male and female characters. Having come to terms with his reality he is always in Paradise — he communicates his tranquility to his friends, too.

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 the expression of one of Baldwin's major insights.
On coming to New York, after accepting a role in a Broadway play, Eric meets Rufus and the two romp through a brief homosexual affair. Racism surfaces and there is a sort of love-hate relationship between the two. Being perceptive, Eric recognises the tragedy depicted in the life of Rufus, that is, Rufus has not discovered his identity nor accepted his homosexuality. Eric visits the Silenskis. They are quarreling. Their children have been beaten by blacks in Central Park. There is conflict and despair in the atmosphere. The Silenski's marriage is on the rocks and Cass is in search of a new relationship. Eric is lonely, for Yves has stayed back in France. Eric and Cass come together and the brief relationship they share enriches them both. Eric warns her that though he wants to help her he cannot because love is her only salvation and he cannot give her that.

Eric is level-headed enough to understand that frustration and anguish make human destiny, this understanding gives him strength to rise above pain and accept his bisexuality.

Vivaldo Moore is of Irish-Italian parentage. He is an unpublished novelist. When Rufus clings to him in his hour of need and confesses the turmoil of his mind, Vivaldo recognises his own reality in the life-story of Rufus. He has buried the despair in his subconscious and lives on a different plane. He has a homosexual relationship with Eric Jones and finds complete
happiness and satisfaction in the relationship. He is wise enough to realise there is no future in such a relationship. To live a parasitic existence with Eric Jones, is not acceptable to him.

At Rufus’ funeral Vivaldo meets Ida, Rufus’ sister, whom he had first seen when she was in pigtails. At the time of the funeral Ida is working as a waitress but is struggling to become a singer. Vivaldo is a liberal white, so he has no qualms about accepting her as a sex partner. Besides, guilt has been gnawing at his peace of mind for not coming to the rescue of Rufus when he had come to him for help.

I guess I still wonder, what would have happened if I’d taken him in my arms, if I’d held him, if I hadn’t been... afraid .... But, oh, Lord, when he died, I thought that may be I could have saved him if I’d just reached out that quarter of an inch between us on that bed and held him.17

To make amends he encourages the relationship between himself and Ida to bloom. Gradually, the relationship between the two becomes intense, yet they drift apart. Ida has an affair with Steve Ellis, a rich T.V. producer, but realising that she is betraying Vivaldo she confesses to Vivaldo her affair and assures him that she loves him and prefers staying with him. He recognises her vulnerable position as a black woman in a white dominated society, a society in which all white men think that
a black woman is promiscuous and an easy lay. He forgives her and offers her the love necessary to preserve her self-respect and dignity.

Richard Silenski is the son of a Polish carpenter but refuses to go in for the profession his father has chosen. He renounces his Polish heritage, too, in search of cheap fame as a novelist. He pursues the American Dream in quest of power and prestige. He is on his way up in the world when he proposes to Cass, a girl from an old aristocratic family of New England and is accepted by her. Self-realisation and peace of mind are not his goals in life. Gradually, he becomes a victim of his success, for he gets so engrossed in pursuing fame that he forgets his wife and neglects her. Starved of love and attention, she turns to Eric, thinking she will find fulfilment in his arms. When later Richard asks her why she chose Eric as a friend, she tells him, "He has something -- something I needed very badly .... A sense of himself." 18

Ultimately, Cass discovers that the strained relationship between the two is caused by a misunderstanding. A reconciliation takes place.

All the characters in the book reject the conventional divisions of family, race, country, religion and sex to pursue their identity and to overcome their isolation so that they can understand
themselves and others. They have to resolve their dilemmas which make them vacillate between life and death, love and happiness and to struggle against odds, with no clear answers to the questions that haunt them.

Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone (1968) is Baldwin's fourth novel and the longest of those preceding it. The book reflects the spirit of the sixties when people were occupied in finding answers to a number of questions related to the Negro's plight — his agony, anxiety, fear, grief, and his life of silence, invisibility and irksome solitariness. They were concerned with finding out the ultimate destination of the Negro and wondered whether the Negro could reach it by integration, separation or liberation.

For the first time Baldwin throws his net beyond the personal and private affairs of the individual to encompass the political and social tumult around him. Concern for and social involvement with social problems of his time are reflected in his sympathy for the militant black youths fighting for the rights of their race. Vehemently and in unambiguous terms, the political issues which were making murky the social stream were dealt with. During the time preceding this novel, Baldwin had been busy with the Civil Rights Movement and other political activities. Baldwin was aware of the change in the Negro's attitude. Though centuries had passed, the Negro in the sixties was still considered to be
the dregs of humanity. He was then not willing to vegetate at the bottom of the social, political and economic heaps. A degree of political shift from previous liberal attitude has crept into the theme of *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*. The book poses a number of questions which demand to know the individual's relationship to society and to others living in the society.

Baldwin realised that the integration which he had dreamed of all his life, was still a mirage on the distant horizon. It would take time for the white man and the black man to become psychologically one and the privileges and prejudices to be raised or razed to one level in society. At the same time it was heartening to know that the "segregation" of the past was dead beyond revival.

The book is divided into three sections, "The House Nigger", "Is There Anybody There? said the Traveller" and "Black Christopher". Incidents and situations from Baldwin's own experiences and observations are assembled to form the framework of the plot. Recollections and reminiscences are stringed together to give the right perspective to a sequence of events. The theme is three dimensional - religious, political and aesthetic and revolves around the Harlem ghetto, religion as an escape from reality, alienation from religion, interminable struggle of the black artist in realising success and his subsequent alienation from his
heritage and people — the plight of black man trying to belong to both worlds and missing his foothold in both. There are interracial love relationships, racial prejudice, heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual relationships. A plethora of sex activities and crude, frank, vulgar usage of words, make the book a little unusual.

The story begins in Harlem. The Proudhammer family, like other black families, lives below the poverty line in a squalid, rat-infested, high-priced, dilapidated apartment, waging a continuous battle against social problems involving juvenile delinquency, exorbitant prices, landlord tyranny, police brutality, immorality, drug abuse, crime and racism. This evil world is the world of reality for the Negro.

The Proudhammer family consisting of the father, mother and two sons have come from Barbados after the father has proved to be a miserable failure at farming. Defeated by life, he continues fighting against his lot. The mother and two sons of this story are based on characters in Go Tell It on the Mountain. Both boys in the novel are intelligent and sensitive and find it difficult to withstand the unkind sufferings they have to undergo in life.

How the two brothers sublimate their depressions and frustrations, how they gain strength from setbacks and their journey through pain and sorrow in search of "self", is poignantly told by Baldwin. The story is essentially of the two brothers, Leo
and Caleb. Their experience connotes in a miniscule the whole gamut of the Negro experience in racist American society. The story tackles the question of survival and enumerates the achievements of a talented Negro artiste, in spite of the odds stacked against him because certain people do not like the colour of his skin.

The elder brother, Caleb, is seven years Leo's senior and a hero in the eyes of his younger brother. While still in his teens, he divides his time between stealing and sexual activities.

Quite early in life, he is convicted of a store robbery and is sent to a prison farm to serve a four-year sentence. He returns home bitter, enraged and brutalised. He resents the social structure in which the laws of society are framed to hammer the Negroes into servile "self" less stereotypes, devoid of spirit and human dignity. God also seems to side with the white people against the black people. Caleb's impressions of God can be gauged from an incident that takes place in his adolescent days. Leo and Caleb were returning home when they were stopped and searched by some policemen. Since nothing incriminating was found on them, they were allowed to go. The bitterness that wells up in Caleb is passionately expressed by the author.

Thanks, you white cock sucking dog-shit miserable white mother fuckers. Thank all of you scum-bag Christians .... Thanks, good Jesus Christ. Thanks for letting us go home .... You could have let us just get our brains beat out ....
After returning from the prison farm Caleb starts working in the factory where his father is engaged but cannot tolerate the humiliations heaped upon his father. Full of despair and frustrations, Caleb leaves for California to work in a shipyard. There he comes in conflict with the law and joins the army. In Europe, Caleb has a dramatic experience which completely transforms his atheism into belief in the Lord. Frederick, a friend, manages to entice Caleb's girl-friend and an affronted Caleb vows to kill Frederick. However, before he can take a pot shot at him, Frederick is gunned down by a sniper's rifle. Realisation dawns on a grateful and relieved Caleb,

I knew, I knew for the first time that there was a God somewhere. I knew that only God could save me, save us, not from death but from that other death, that darkness and death of the spirit which had created this hell .... I understood for the first time the power and the beauty of the love of God ....

Caleb is saved and on returning to New York dedicates his life to the Lord. He gets married, has children, a very respectable job and moulds himself according to the norms of conventionality — he compromises with the reality of his situation and finds a haven in God.

Caleb and Leo had been very close during their childhood. Once Leo had promised Caleb, "I love you, Caleb, I'll love you for ever ...."
After Caleb becomes a minister of God the two brothers drift apart and when Caleb tries to persuade Leo to join the Lord's fold, Leo curses,

That God you talk about, that miserable white cock sucker — look at his handiwork, look! ... I curse your God, Caleb, I curse Him, from the bottom of my heart I curse Him.22

The central character in the book is Leo Proudhammer, a famous Negro actor — his life story in the first person gives the theme a theatrical background. The story opens with Leo, at thirty-nine, recuperating in a hospital in San Francisco after a massive heart attack. During his convalescence Leo reflects over the events of his early life. He drifts into the past and dwells over memories that flash into his mind at random, run their course before being replaced in the thought-stream. The reminiscences are not in a chronological order. Leo interprets their meaning from a mature perspective gained through experience and observation.

Leo was born and brought up in Harlem in the twenties. During a short poverty-stricken childhood he becomes acquainted with loss, suffering, deprivation, desolation, isolation and excruciating pain. He hates the God who does not protect him and his family from the white community. At a very young age he becomes aware of the colour of his skin and all it means.
Colour imprisons, shackles and causes disparity. Black colour spells powerlessness within the white power structure. Justice, law and order are there to safeguard the white man and to brutalise and humiliate the Negro. Colour transcends moral and ethical values. One day, returning home from the movies, the two brothers have an encounter with some policemen. Leo is so frightened by the behaviour of the policemen that he asks his brother Caleb,

Are white people -- people? People like us? Caleb responds, All I can tell you Leo, is -- well they don't think they are.23

Leo had always wanted to be an actor but despite being talented he has to struggle long to reach the top. He progresses from one stereotype role to another, grabs a singing waiter's job, is happy to do base bit parts but finally gets a big break which launches him on a meteoric rise to international stardom. When he gets the heart attack, he has been offered the role of a man -- a part which does not specifically require a Negro actor. The journey to fame, wealth, prestige has been long and sorrowful but Leo realises his ambitions. The paradigm of Leo's acting career is the history of the Negro artistes in miniature -- the only difference being that success eludes many in the end.

The black artiste escapes the prison of his colour through his art -- the release gives him a new lease of life and hope. His life story is usually tinged with the "Blues" of his heritage.
His distinction may give him entry into the white world but his problems do not decrease. The Negro who succeeds after waging a relentless struggle against heavy odds is as isolated and alienated from humanity as the Negro who does not. Leo is trapped in his colour, he does not like people around him — he rejects all he comes in contact with — including his father, mother and brother. He even keeps Christopher and Barbara at arm's length by telling each that he is emotionally and sexually committed to the other. Leo says,

\[\text{The only space which means anything to me is the space between myself and other people. May it never diminish.}^{24}\]

When Caleb relates to Leo the incident which converted him into a believer, Leo realises the reality of his brother's experience but refuses to accept it as his own reality. He bitterly denounces Caleb's God, "That God you talk about, that miserable white cock sucker, look at His handiwork, look! ... I curse your God, Caleb, I curse Him."\(^{25}\)

He knows, henceforth, he will live without his brother and God. The theme of alienation which forms Leo's story is the heart of the Negro question in America and encompasses the whole gamut of conflict in the life of the Negro.

Leo's love affair is intricately woven into the story of his success. One summer, while attending the Actors' Means Workshop
in New Jersey, he meets the beautiful Barbara King, a Kentucky heiress, who wishes to become an actress. Both Leo and Barbara are around twenty. They fall deeply in love, Leo tells her of his bisexuality but she brushes it aside as of no consequence. Though Leo loves her, he is at times brutal towards her and ill-treats her.

The course of the lovers' love, of course, does not run smooth. Society frowns and their families denounce them and renounce all ties with them. They have to face the resentment, hostility and violent reaction of the social forces, ugly taunts and vulgar epithets of the man in the street. Parents foment terror by posing questions of racial incompatibility and miscegenation. Ostracization, alienation and isolation make them wretched, miserable and lonely. "Fear and love cannot long remain in the same bed together."  

Leo and Barbara are helplessly and hopelessly trapped in a love which provides no security, support or future possibility. It is, therefore, not surprising that for the next seven years their love is now-hot, now-cold affair. Both take on other lovers off and on. Leo feels love is not enough to sustain a relationship, it also entails a commitment which Leo is afraid to give, "Because I was certain that Barbara could not stay with me. I dared not be committed to Barbara."  

"
However, love is a power too strong to be overcome by the whims and caprices of society at large. Leo and Barbara live through the vicissitudes of life together in Greenwich village, for they have known each other for many years, they have suffered together. Barbara is a vibrant, vital, admirable woman who loves Leo sincerely. Their love triumphs. Both rise to stardom and when Leo transcends the socio-economic barrier, colour loses its evil potency. They achieve a sex identity through sex and love and they carve their social identity through success as artistes.

Black Christopher is the third angle in the unusual triangle of lover (Leo), beloved (Barbara) and boy-friend (Christopher). He is a boy-friend of Leo Proudhammer though he has a short-lived affair with Barbara, too. He is a brash young revolutionary, twenty years junior to Leo. He is a close friend of Leo with whom Leo first establishes sex relations and then forms a political association. He is symbolic of the revolutionary black youth. Caleb is replaced by Christopher in Leo's heart and indirectly signifies Baldwin's increasing preference for young black militancy. He casts aside "religion as an escape", symbolised by Caleb. Baldwin's growing hope and interest in the black youth, who stand for violence to achieve their ends, is a clear change in his political beliefs which have undergone a change since he first started writing. Leo aligns himself with the new black
revolutionaries who want guns and wish to know how to "avoid going under the feet of horses." Leo's political commitment to Black Christopher also asserts his commitment to his racial identity and reconciliation with his racial heritage.

The problem of colour lies heavy on the hearts and minds of the people of America. When a black man crosses the race barrier he is under relentless social, sexual and racial pressures which impinge upon the peace of his mind, creating grave psychological upheaval in the mental makeup. Racism and protest are unambiguously made explicit in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone.

In narrating the experiences of Leo Proudhammer and by expressing emotions and sensitivities of the other characters around him, Baldwin lodges a protest against society. In Harlem Leo faces the ugly reality of his colour. He is made aware of his inferiority and very wisely conditions himself to the disdain, brutality and menace of the arbitrary power structure symbolised by the white policeman. When he goes into a diner he is humiliated because of his colour -- Baldwin again expresses his protest. There is another incident related to register protest--Leo, Barbara and Jerry, a man of Italian origin, go to a restaurant where they are joined by Madeline, another white actress and two other black men. After the party Leo accompanies Madeline to
her apartment. The next day when he is seen leaving her apartment there is a tumultuous hue and cry. Leo is arrested and jailed without anybody framing any charges against him. Baldwin's protest is explicit -- he knows that there are countless men of his race who are subjected to torment and torture, not because they have contravened the law of the land but because the colour of their skin is disliked by the majority community in America.

Leo and Barbara transcend the racial barriers and love each other but because Leo is black, society is up in arms against the love affair. Leo is always fearful that the hostility will lead to some violent physical outrage, "I didn't want all my teeth knocked out, didn't want my nose smashed, my eyes blinded, didn't want my skull caved in ...." 28

Leo and Barbara are compelled to take a cab when they have to move about in the city, for they know their moral courage will wilt in the wake of the menacing white prejudice surrounding them. Baldwin wonders what happens to the law and order establishment of the organised society in the United States when the black man's respect, dignity and safety are involved.

At the Actors' Means Workshop, located in a small town in New England, where Barbara and Leo are attending the summer session, the white community does not approve of Leo staying with
the white participants. When Saul, who runs the workshop, sees the growing attachment between Barbara and Leo, he warns Leo not to let his aspirations soar too high or he will meet disappointment.

These and numerous other incidents in which Leo is involved and has to suffer because of his black skin are related in the book. Baldwin intends to register his protest against racism.

For the first time Baldwin introduces the militant revolutionary in the character of Black Christopher in his writings. Through Leo, Baldwin expresses his sympathy for the black youth of America who feel, "we need us some guns", for deliverance from heaven has not been forthcoming. The prevailing situation in America in the sixties was dismal indeed and Leo's association with inter-racial politics through Christopher signifies racial identification and social involvement for the upliftment of the underprivileged Negro community. Baldwin was convinced that till the social matrix became one plain plane either by raising the Negro to the level of the white man or by razing the level of the white man to the level of the Negro, inequality, prejudice and hostility would continue in the entire American system.

If Beale Street Could Talk (1974) is an inexorable indictment of white America. The protest is loud and bitter but love is the saving grace in it that prevents it from becoming a
clamorous propaganda. The protest is directed against white hypocrisy and white callousness which have stood for the denial of the fundamental rights to the Negro and have been responsible for the tragic pain, suffering, helplessness, hopelessness and a myriad other fears that have branded and scarred the Negro psyche. Baldwin has radically changed his artistic stance towards protest writing and has become a strong voice against white depravity, hate, ignorance — all suggestive of the Negro's pain and suffering. He speculates on the Negro's chances of survival in a hate-ridden environment. Baldwin has seldom written so bitterly and with so much rage.

Another feature of the Establishment that comes under heavy fire from Baldwin's pen is the highly negative, repressive and arm-twisting arm of the judiciary that has victimised, harassed, shamed, abused, imprisoned, robbed and raped the black people from the time they set foot on American soil. Equality before the law is mere propaganda, in reality, being black makes it much more difficult to get justice — if justice is sometimes doled out it is of the Jim Crow variety. White courts interpret the spirit of the law in different versions for the black and white people.

The policeman, in Baldwin's novels, is greedy and a hard-hearted tyrant with brutal disposition and the wit of a nit. The policeman, Bell, of If Beale Street Could Talk
... walked the way John Wayne walks, striding out to clean the universe ... a wicked, stupid infantile mother fucker. Like his heroes, he was kind of pin headed, heavy gutted, big assed, and his eyes were as blank as George Washington's eyes. 30

Baldwin's policemen are armed with obscene power and deal their blows with heavy bludgeons liberally on all sides to put the fear of the white power structure in the hearts of the black people. They seem to be cut off from humaneness and the human race, for they are the ever-ready instruments of persecution let loose by the law. They unscrupulously violate the law they represent. Few can believe that such inhuman officers exist in civilised society.

Tish is mortally afraid of Bell, the policeman. One day as she is walking home with a bagful of stolen supplies for Fonny, she catches sight of Bell swaggering towards her. He is ready to overlook his duty of charging her with stealing if she grants him a favour. They look into each other's eyes that are the mirrors of their souls. Tish sees a pit, a horror which has no bottom. The impact is beyond race, and beyond escape. Tish cannot ever forget what she has seen and she is afraid of Bell.

Bell, the racist policeman, needs a rape suspect. He conveniently arrests Fonny on a fabricated charge, and sends him to jail without bond. The judicial machinery moves deliberately and compellingly towards conviction of the innocent young man.
The principle of justice that every man is innocent till proved guilty is suspended. Fonny's family has to run from pillar to post to assemble proof to establish his innocence. As Fonny's lawyer says,

We have to disprove the state's case. There is no point in saying that we have to make them prove it, because as far as they're concerned, the accusation is the proof.\(^{31}\)

Hayward, the white lawyer, engaged for Fonny's defence, knows that truth is being sacrificed for expediency. Discerning the hypocrisy inherent in America's judicial system, he comments, "The truth of a case doesn't matter. What matter is -- who wins."\(^{32}\)

Blatant injustice reigns supreme to persecute black people.

The street is a very common symbol, for it is a theatre in which you can see the unfolding of many familiar stories of life -- boy meeting the girl, the cop wielding the baton on the just and the unjust and thrilling dramatic events spurting into action. The street is a moralist, too, and nobody knows the tragedy and disaster of human helplessness as well as those who walk the street. Tish is afraid of the street, for it is also the beat of Bell, the policeman.

Allegorically speaking, If Beale Street Could Talk is a tender, passionate love story which describes the trials and tribulations of the young lovers. One presumes that after passing
through the ordeal of separation, Tish and Fonny will marry and then ride off together towards the rising sun to find eternal happiness — to be more correct, the type of "happiness" which the Negro can secure in racial America! There are innumerable currents and cross-currents of a hostile environment. Because the lovers are black their problems and fears multiply to include dispossession, suffering, denial, deprivation, poverty, "self"-lessness, alienation, racism, the brutal law enforcement establishment, an unfair judicial system and a prejudiced economic structure. Baldwin's rage and bitterness sear the pages of the book. Running through the poignant story is the "Blues" motif.

A great story that will move us as one of the great blue songs, a lyrical cry and pain and gritty endurance, from the heart of a young black woman whose man is in jail.\(^{33}\)

Baldwin adopts a truculent attitude to project the painfully harsh facts of black life in America. The entire system is oppressive and stands for victimisation of the black colour. Consequently, the trapped Negro cannot carve out his identity, quest for identity is possible only in cultural freedom. Such deplorable lack of humanitarianism and justice so soured Baldwin that he was compelled to dip his pen in vitriolic language. The Negro around him has endured such calumny and such severe privations that his patience is worn out threadbare,
... so the American Negro has begun to free himself from the reflected image formed of the stereotypes of the white imagination: he has begun to invent himself.

If *Beale Street Could Talk* celebrates this new found capacity for self creation .... The black race finally makes itself in its own image .... Though Baldwin has done much to free the American Negro from the Uncle Tom cliches of white fiction .... 34

The Negro is slowly discovering himself and chalking out his identity. Baldwin rests his hopes on the future generations.

The two striking characters in the book are Clementine Rivers, popularly known as Tish and Alonzo Hunt, nicknamed Fonny. Tish is nineteen years old and Fonny is twenty two. Fonny is a struggling sculptor and his dream is to etch out his identity through his art. Both Fonny and Tish are black, poorly educated, unsophisticated and have grown up together in the same neighbourhood. Their friendship has ripened into a growing love. They are endeavouring to discover their "being". They plan to marry in March of that year but their plans go awry when Fonny is accused of raping a Puerto Rican woman, whom he could not have raped and did not rape. The charge has been manipulated by Bell, the corrupt white policeman, whose overtures have been repulsed by Tish.

He walked the way John Wayne walks, striding out to clean up the universe, and he believed all that shit: a wicked, stupid infantile mother fucker .... 35
Fonny is unjustly imprisoned without the benefit of a bond. Tish is the narrator and tells the story with a sensitivity and intensity that brings out the protracted agony of the characters. Her flashbacks into childhood, the day-to-day events, the family united together, her mother going to Puerto Rico to locate the rape victim in order to persuade her to change her testimony, her efforts to raise money for Fonny's defence, vignettes of the Hunt household, the wait for the baby -- are all incorporated in the story. Everyone and everything in the story, including the future hope, hinges on the baby when the story ends. Tish's "time has come", time for Fonny's bond is set and we are sure all conflicts will be resolved into a happy ending for everyone. The characters come through with courage undaunted. Hope is in every breast, all who walk the street. The scenes shift and the spectacles change -- the street runs its own Actors' Workshop. If Beale Street Could Talk it could tell us a number of stories. Tish again and again encounters her fate in the street. Her abysmal helplessness, her desperate struggles to escape the traps in the street are mirrored in her frightened eyes. She sees the Devil in the guise of the policeman and every time she sees a different aspect of the Devil's personality.

Another striking motif is the consummation of love in the book. Usually Baldwin's characters grope blindly and hopelessly
for love but it eludes them. The hollow, meaningless values of a hostile environment generate corruption, injustice and intolerable conditions of life which are not conducive to the thriving of love but Baldwin's characters do manage to snatch a few precious moments of love. Love makes lovely things-- the love of Tish and Fonny is a movement towards creating a child that will symbolise the perpetuity of human race.

*If Beale Street Could Talk* not only celebrates the love between man and woman but also flows out beyond the confines of lovers' hearts as a feeling of genuine affection and mutual concern of a family for the welfare of its members. In Baldwin's books the family is rarely a united unit -- there is hardly any communication between the members and this leads to perversion and frustration. The Rivers family is united in love for the unborn baby. Not once does Tish's family rebuke her for becoming pregnant out of wedlock. In fact, her father says he is "proud of her". Tish's family is determined to fight the power of the Establishment and to free Fonny with the help of men, money and materials.

There are spiritual undercurrents in the book; Baldwin is disillusioned by the white Christians and vehemently criticises God and the Church. "The concept of God can make us larger, freer and more loving." But he has found Christianity to be
References


9. Ibid., p. 22.

10. Ibid., p. 22.


13. Ibid., p. 22.


15. Ibid., p. 49.


21. Ibid., p. 211.

22. Ibid., p. 425.

23. Ibid., p. 46.


25. Ibid., p. 425.


27. Ibid., p. 274.

28. Ibid., p. 269.


32. Ibid., p. 93.


