African – American writers have always been preoccupied with racial themes and cultural legacies. Racism has existed in the lives of black Americans, irrespective of sex. This is due to their history of enslavement and colonization. But even after the slavery was legally abolished, the Negroes continued to be treated with contempt by the Whites and were often made victims of injustice and exploitation by them. But with the birth of ‘Black Renaissance’ the Negro has begun to accept his blackness as a symbol of his ethnic identity. The “Black Power Movement” was a nation – building movement that stressed black pride and militancy. Slowly the blacks began to accept their blackness, all aspects of their personality and their African past with pride about which they were ashamed of at one time. This formation of black consciousness addresses itself to the construction of an identity.

Negro writing in US has been from the first to last a literature of necessity. It took more than a hundred years for the Negro race to produce their representative Negro authors. In order to save the black Americans from the rigid sociological definitions which refused to acknowledge the Negroes humanity, black writers used art as a weapon to present the realities of the life of the Negro people with its pain, joy, humour, faith and sorrows. Many of the black writers used art as a medium to depict the deeper issues of man especially his identity crisis. Among those black writers names of James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry are of great value and significance. They believed in the
Few black American writers have had a more profound impact on Black American culture than James Baldwin. He was born in Harlem in 1924. He has been shaped by the age in which he lived. The bitter struggle of his early life, suffering the pain of being black and poor in America, supporting younger brothers and sisters in Harlem, experiencing religious conversion has yielded brilliant fruit in the passion and humanity of his work. He has been a subject of controversy both as a man and as a writer. The crises in his life provide raw material for his writings especially for the first novel and for the first play. The rebellious nature of his ideas can be explained as a result of the developmental changes in his self and identity all through his life.

Baldwin’s reputation as a dramatist rests primarily upon two works. *The Amen Corner* written in 1954-55 and *Blues for Mister Charlie* written in 1964. *The Amen Corner* is built upon the rhythms of Afro-American Church. *Blues for Mister Charlie* tells the story of Richard Henry, a black youth who temporarily found success in the entertainment world in the North before drug addiction ended his career. A relationship between self and community emerges in both these plays. His first and the greatest novel *Go Tell It On The Mountain* was published in 1953. It can be called Baldwins ‘Spiritual
Autobiography”. Baldwin was obsessively concerned with the writer’s responsibility to save the world.

Lorraine Hansberry was the member of a proud, ancient black family. She was born on May 19, 1930 to Nannie Perry Hansberry and Carl Augustus Hansberry. Her plays about racial conflict have a double outlook, expressing her outrage over both specific injustices done to blacks and humanity’s general capacity for viciousness. Her concern is not confined to black people but to modern man and his plight. When she died of cancer at age thirty four, she left behind an impressive literary legacy.

She has produced five plays of outstanding merit. She was the first black playwright and the youngest of any colour to win the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for her drama A Raisin in the Sun published in the year (1959). The Sign in the Sidney Brusteins Window published in the year 1964, is a life study of modern man and woman caught up in the conflict between not caring and caring too much. After her death her husband Robert Nemiroff edited and published her play Les Blancs in the year 1972. The play offers Hansberry’s most detailed and penetrating analysis of colonialism and neocolonialism in Africa.

Both Lorraine Hansberry and James Baldwin acquired a place of their own, in the history of American Literature as two outstanding black playwrights. They worked within the frame work of their experience as a black man and as a black woman. Both of them were actually aware of the conditions
of the blackman in America. They tried to break the racial barriers between blacks and whites and tried to create self awareness among blacks by presenting their experiences and observations through their works. Their dramas played a dominant role in the creation of black identity in a particularly striking way. They belong to two different periods and they are different from other black playwrights of their period in many respects. Black identity presented by a black male playwright and a black woman playwright differ in many aspects. At the same time through their plays they also reveal a shared vision. They join hands in attacking white racism. The plays of these writers reflect dissatisfaction over the social situation and express rage against social injustice. There is a conscious effort on the part of these dramatists to eliminate the conditions of blacks in America.

The thesis entitled *A Comparative Study of the Search for Black Identity in the Selected Plays of Lorraine Hansberry and James Baldwin* attempts to compare and differentiate the various aspects of black Identity evident in the lives and plays of Lorraine Hansberry and James Baldwin. With this objective three plays of Lorraine Hansberry and two plays of James Baldwin are specially chosen for an in-depth study. They are Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* and *Les Blancs* and James Baldwin’s *Blues for Mister Charlie* and *The Amen Corner*. This Thesis consists of five chapters and a selected bibliography.

Chapter one is designed to supply the necessary information concerning the political, social and cultural background of the Negro which prompt him to
search for identity. Racism in the after civil-war-years has played a major role in destroying the black man’s self esteem and positive identity elements. It is a man made, man enforced phenomenon. Arriving in America in chains black Americans were systematically and legally robbed of their humanity. Blackness was seen as a negative sign a symbol of ugliness, uncontrolled irrational behaviour, violent sexuality and so on. The triangle drawn between devil, black colour and black man became firmly entrenched on the psyche of white America. This situation of blackman cannot be treated as an isolated problem of blackman alone. It is entwined with the greater problems of American civilization and democracy and it reflects the general American anxiety over identity. The Negro’s obsession with identity has emerged as a result of his peculiar experience in America. With the birth of the “Black Power Movements” after the second world war, the Negro has begun to accept his blackness as a symbol of his ethnic identity. Many creative black writers emerged and they began to portray realistically and faithfully the life of their people. These writers accept their blackness with pride and search to find out the mode for expressing their identity artistically. By exploring and exhibiting the rich complexity of Negro experience the black writers assisted their people in their self discovery and in the creation of an identity of their own. They proved that art can be a weapon to liberate people.

Chapter two focuses on the theme of identity. Various identity theories are discussed and a description of the problems of identity faced by the African-American is also given. Most of the modern man’s problems arise
from his identity confusions. It is one of the most important conflicts people experience and it is inevitable in shaping human beings and their development. It is really a generational issue. Various definitions on the process of identity formation have already been formulated by several eminent psychologists. Erik Erikson’s psycho-social theory is widely and highly regarded. His theory is useful far beyond psychoanalysis. So Erickson’s theories are taken as the main source of analysis in this chapter. Identity means essentially how a person sees himself in relation to his world. It is a sense of self in the context of life and what lies ahead. To successfully achieve a sense of personal identity a conception of the self must be developed which incorporates a recognition of one’s capabilities and limitations. Self cannot be separated from the surrounding environment. A person’s past is a powerful reality. The interaction between the individuals and the social environment is a major contribution of psycho-social theory. A mentally healthy person lives and mixes with the world with full confidence as he is fully conscious of his identity.

Race is a form of social identification. African Americans had to grapple with the reality of being defined as the lowest status group in American society. The identity problems that the black Americans faced was enormous and immensely complex. Constant and unrelenting portrayals of their inferiority conditioned blacks to a self image of being culturally backward, primitive, intellectually stunned, prone to violence, morally corrupt and undeserving of the benefits of civilization. So the dilemma for the low status races was, how to construct a positive identity for themselves in the light of the racial identity
imposed on them by dominant society. So a Negro, out of his experiences and oppression he faced, struggles to create a universal identity. A Negro’s search for his identity and his desire to create a universal identity is clearly revealed in the works of James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry.

Chapter three undertakes a detailed investigation of identity quest found in James Baldwin’s plays. The personal, political and literary influences on Baldwin have been analysed in an attempt to examine the nature of identity he has acquired. Through his intensely personal art, Baldwin has achieved an extraordinary popular appeal, which has made him one of the most widely, read black writers of the twentieth century. Out of Baldwin’s experiences have emerged certain recurring themes in writing, the most important of which is the search for self identity.

The crises in Baldwin’s life-artistic, religious and sexual have given rise to a single minded dedication to the search for discovery of the self. Baldwin was aware of his situations and failings, in his endeavours to discover the “surrendered identity” in himself and in his black brothers. Baldwin’s experiences with race and sex that find expression in his works assisted the positive growth of self understanding in others also. The self-knowledge he gained from his Negro heritage, from the awareness of his role as a writer and in particular from his terrific experiences as a black homosexual artist in America, has contributed to his act of self definition, and his sense of a shared destiny with his community. For Baldwin, the act of writing was an obsessive need as well as the most meaningful way in which he could speak for himself.
His quest had been to discover his self, his identity and the force that had gone into the making of his life. He saw the search for identity as an American problem. In Baldwin’s opinion all human beings are trapped between self imposed image and reality. So they are unable to release their full energies in the identity quest. They are prisoner’s of the undiscovered self. Baldwin believed that the question of colour, crucially important on a moral level, concealed a more fundamental problem, the problem of self. Baldwin’s life had been an endless struggle to confront his blackness and his troubling sexuality in an effort to discover his self and achieve the identity of a proud black American.

Chapter four brings into focus search for identity found in the plays of Lorraine Hansberry. Hansberry’s depth of commitment in life and in art, her concern for her people resulted in making her a writer of all seasons. Her foremost concern was the liberation of her fellow blacks in America. She was conscious of her identity as a black American writer and also her obligations to the black community. Through her plays she tried to bring about a new awareness about self identity and racial identity. She was highly conscious of her responsibility as a writer and found drama as a suitable medium to reveal what she truly felt. Finding the truth of self and expressing it fearlessly and forcefully became her prime concern.

Lorraine Hansberry’s portraits of black life and culture is characterized by a vision distinctively feminine and different from that of many black male dramatists of the period. She has shown the American stage a multiplicity of
images of female heroines and has not confined herself to such limiting images of black women, frigid, overbearing, or pathetically helpless. The images of the black culture and ethnic identity which Hansberry evokes in her plays acquire an added dimension on account of the black idiom which she employs in her plays. The quest for identity leads her to evolve a theatre designed for the creation of a sense of the communal form and a theatre which is a monument built out of black awareness.

Hansberry refused to make ultimate distinctions between people on the basis of colour but did make distinctions on the basis of attitudes about colour. She never hesitated to oppose anyone of any colour who supported racism or to join forces with anyone who actively opposed it. For her to be “black is to be beautiful”. She wants the blacks to take pride in their race, their colour and their soil. She asserts black man’s dignity as a human being. Colour alone cannot define human quality. She believed in the power of the Negro people. Her attitude to the conditions of blacks in America helped her to shape her identity as an African–American writer.

The essence of her dramatic vision was her belief that the individual who emerges from conflict with his or her moral convictions and courage strengthened becomes a force for progress in society. She stated with her life, that all people – young and old – are obliged to do the very best that they can do to illuminate the black condition which is also the human condition.
Chapter five gives the conclusion with a comparative study of the identity quest in James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry. There are various similarities and differences between Lorraine Hansberry and James Baldwin in their treatment of the theme – identity. Identity of a person is never stable. It always undergoes changes. Lack of self knowledge and a sense of non identity fill a person with self hate. A person with a satisfactory self will not try to escape from the real life experiences. Hansberry and Baldwin succeeded in establishing the Negro experience as of immediate relevance to a society concerned with the problem of identity.