

CHAPTER FOUR

**‘I AM AS THE OTHER SEES ME’: BALDWIN AND THE
UNINTENTIONAL COLLUSION OF THE OPPRESSED**

My momma says I'm Reckless,
my daddy says I'm wild
I ain't goodlooking but
I'm somebody's angel child.

–Bessie Smith.

Why you so black?
cause I am
why you so funky?
cause I am
why you so black?
cause I am
why you so sweet?
cause I am
why you so black?
cause I am
a love supreme, a love supreme:
–Michael S. Harper, “Dear John, Dear Coltrane.”

James Baldwin (1924-1987) emerged in the intellectual scene as a critic of contemporary literature. A prolific writer who contributed consistently as an African American voice in his career, he is incredibly relevant today.

The aims of the chapter are

- (i) to highlight how Baldwin channelizes his writing in a way that was different from his contemporary protest fiction, which he rejects as “symptoms of our tension” rather than an “examination;”
- (ii) to show how the concept of identity for an American goes beyond the racial matrix, in that a common cultural heritage of the blacks and whites formulate the American identity;
- (iii) to show how evasion and misrecognition of a particular population's identity cripples one's own;

- (iv) to show how the American experience and identity are rediscovered and reassessed vis-à-vis the expatriate condition, in that “I am as the other sees me” of Sartre finds ample scope of manifestation;
- (v) to study Baldwin’s novels as the fictional companion to experiences and evidences he highlights and warns of in his essays and
- (vi) to show how the androgynous nature of humans is being undermined by the demands of sexual roles reserved exclusively for women and men.
- (vii) to show how the oppressed collude unintentionally in determining and seeing oneself in a particular position, subject to a specific set of behaviour.

Much of Baldwin’s writings remain ineluctably fastened to the African American experience, but he conjoins this to the broader concept and challenges of the American experience as a whole. That being established, Baldwin reshaped the contours of scholarly inquiry that moves away from statement of the problem to examination of the same. His manifold focus on streets and prisons, sexuality and morality, spaces and violence, sexual abuse and masculinity introduced a genre of writing that attributes outward upheavals of character, dynamics of relationship and a sense/loss of the self to racial prejudices that African Americans are subjected to.

The texts selected for the purpose of the study are: *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), *Another Country* (1963), *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) among his fictional writings. The non-fiction accompaniments include the collections *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), *The Fire Next Time* (1963), and *No Name in the Street* (1972), as well as a few pieces published in magazines. Along with this, the chapter will have important conversation pieces, interviews and letters that help to understand his stance on modernity and contribution to a modernity module that has stood the test of time.

Giovanni’s Room deals with David’s stay in Paris where he has a passionate love affair with Giovanni. However, when his girlfriend returns to the scene, he refuses any seriousness or credibility to the affair. David gives in to codes of masculinity that can be ascribed to a heteronormative American manual. Giovanni, however, is unable to recover from this sudden estrangement: it lands him in a series of desperate dealings until it eventually ends his life.

Another Country, by its very title, is a wish as well as a presence of a place/space in the novel. With parallel stories set in American and Paris, and with its central character dead within the first hundred pages of the novel, the novel is a continuity of the exploration of sexual relationships of the many lives in New York. Hatred, desire and violence loom large throughout the novel, and Rufus is an absent presence, whose acquaintances determine the course of events.

If Beale Street Could Talk is Baldwin's only novel with a female narrative voice. Tish, who is pregnant with a child from her boyfriend, manoeuvres dealings with law and prison visits for the sake of a falsely accused rape charge on him. What stands out in this emotional tribute to wronged colored citizens is the place of the family in African American lives. The love explored is not just romantic but familial. Tish's mother is as much involved in her daughter's relentless efforts to free her fiancé, and neither she falters nor gives way to complacency.

The methodology used is a re-examination of identities encoded in race, space and nationalism. For the purpose any predetermined fixities are inadequate to accommodate the diversities of experiences that an individual/ race/ nation go through.

Protest Fiction and Its Alternatives

James Baldwin's legacy as a radical social commentator owes its origins to the non-fiction writings, often described as 'prophetic'. He started his career with his review of books primarily written on blacks or by blacks. Furnished with a cosmopolitan taste and knowledge of the current trends in writing, he shaped his writing career out of his own bittersweet experiences as an African American. It is no wonder then that "Everybody's Protest Novel", taking as its centre stage the new genre of fiction, established him as the intellectual figure with a difference from what was in vogue as well as a voice that moved beyond complaining of what was so wrong and how disgusting the whites were. This essay was also a disclaimer to what he would not write on. It is a scathing attack on the "sentimentality" (Baldwin, *Essays* 12) of protest novels beginning with Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Such works, in Baldwin's analyses are inadequate in addressing the motivations behind the descriptions of gross acts being done to the blacks that are rampant in their pages. It reduces thereby to basic pamphleteering when it restricts itself to the message that slavery was wrong or horrible.

Interestingly, the essay is most well remembered as Baldwin writing back to Richard Wright, and what was so wrong in Bigger Thomas being portrayed the way he was: hurling curses at the whites and believing and living a theology that had been thrust on him by the whites. He, to quote Baldwin's words, "admits the possibility of his being sub-human" (18). What Wright allows his character is to be defined by the whites' system of reality. In "Notes of a Native Son", Baldwin examines the visceral impact of racism, this danger of definition of oneself in racial, subjugated terms that cripples one's identity. The long-term impact is hatred both for the system and the whites, but most importantly, self-hatred or alienation from the black community itself. Baldwin, after his father's death, looks back on his life which had a recurring trait in his personal and societal relationships, that is, bitterness:

He had lived and died in an intolerable bitterness of spirit and it frightened me, as we drove him to the graveyard through those unquiet, ruined streets, to see how powerful and overflowing this bitterness could be and to realise that this bitterness now was mine. (65)

This bitterness with implications of self-hatred reached its peak during one instance he clearly remembers of a New Jersey restaurant where he met with what he had already encountered at many places before: "We don't serve Negroes here." This emphatically is followed by his attempt to hurl something at the waitress who, in a slight difference from earlier encounters of hostility to Negroes actually sounded quite apologetic. This increases his hatred and anger manifold and he picked up a mug of water and hurled it at her. The repercussions of this act were natural: being chased. However, he is bothered even more by his realisation of two things: one, that he and people like him are always at the risk of getting murdered and, two, the act of murder as a doorway to understanding how racism deters growth and individuality in society, especially black society, and incites violence. He devotes a few lines to this hatred that denies any semblance of normalcy in black life. This is as much an understanding of his father's bitter, aggressive, violent relationships with his family as of the community that is abused more often than acknowledged. He attributes this bitter existence and the epistemology of survival to not anything external to him, but to the danger "from the hatred I carried in my own heart" (72). In other words, he sees how every black person 'denied' is a bitter and violent person born.

Eros as Thanatos: Psychological/Psychological Dystopias

Baldwin channels his epistemology of survival —the twin courses of bitterness and hatred— in *Another Country* to almost all of his characters. Rufus stands out in that this hatred eventually leads him to take his own life. Peace is tarnished owing to this hatred. In what looks like a psychological mechanism to cope with racial slurs, he allows hatred and its seductions to persist. The idea is that once one gives up bitterness, the very drive that allows life to a black person, one is forced to deal with pain. Rufus provides a key to this:

I imagine that one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain.
(Baldwin, *Another* 75)

However, this bitterness should not be read as a hatred reserved exclusively for the whites. This feeling of bitterness and scorn pervades all exchanges. Even in what seems to be an apparently innocent relationship such as Baldwin's with his aunt, he finds her despicable for no reason, only to come to the conclusion that "there was another me trapped in my skull like a jack-in-the-box who might escape my control at any moment and fill the air with screaming" (76). This 'another' and the dangers of it operates a psychological divide in the person, showing up clutter the individual for long. In Rufus' case, the 'escape' dramatically climaxes in his jumping off the bridge. He knows there is no return to the world. The pain he sought escape from could only lead him to a moment like this: "*all right, you motherfucking Godalmighty bastard, I'm coming to you*" (93). It is not as if he arrives at the last escape without his thoughts being mediated by memories of lost love and longing. He thinks of Eric in his last moment, the man he had an affair with at one time. He thinks of his sister Ida. He thinks of Leona, his white female partner from the South and their relationship that was fraught with violence and humiliation towards her. We see how Rufus' piled up hatred—hatred not particularly directed to any person— articulates in his hypersexual relationship with Leona. In what is supposed to be an act of love, the passages of their sexual acts are gross acts of violence being done to a female body. This hatred he feels—towards Leona and her repeated assurances that there "ain't nothing wrong in being colored" (60)—sets up the mood for the creation and consumption of the 'another' in Baldwin's dissection of violent and aggressive men. That 'another' sees in this assurance a combination of "ignorance" and "indifference"

(60). At other times her eyes reflected “some immense sexual secret which tormented her” (60). Often though, the ‘another’ would scream out in violence and gloat over causing her tangible pain and hurt. These are most apparent in passages like:

...he had, suddenly, without knowing that he was going to, thrown the whimpering, terrified Leona onto the bed, the floor, pinned her against a table or a wall; she beat at him, weakly, moaning, unutterably abject; he twisted his fingers in her long pale hair and used her in whatever way he felt would humiliate her most. It was not love he felt during these acts of love: drained and shaking, utterly unsatisfied, he fled from the raped white woman into the bars. (60)

The condemnation of the whites, and here of Leona as the face of that white ‘available’ to him, creates in him a man he is a stranger to, beating up women and assuming control over a white woman. Right at the end of the passage just quoted, the reader receives a premonition of Rufus’ later decision of ending his life: But the air through which he rushed was his prison and he could not even summon the breath to call for help (60-61).

Rufus has lived his entire life in a world which chooses to erase the existence of the black. When he roams the streets with a white woman, people glare at him, inciting hatred and suspicion. His anger, bitterness and hatred combine to drive him to his death wish. In his last fight with Leona which drives Vivaldo to offer her to stay at his place while he stays with Rufus, Rufus tells Vivaldo how much and how he hates everyone who is white:

How I hate them-all those white sons of bitches out there. They’re trying to kill me, you think I don’t know? ‘You got to fight with the landlord because the landlord’s white! You got to fight with the elevator boy because he’s *white*. Any bum on the Bowery can shit all over you because may be he can’t hear, can’t see, can’t walk, can’t fuck– but he’s *white*!’ (74)

The italicisation of ‘white’ here can be related to an *Esquire* interview where Baldwin discusses how white has come to connote more than a skin shade. In Baldwin’s words, it’s an ‘attitude’. The degree varies as one decides to use and bask in the privileges that come with it: one is as white as one thinks s/he is. The whiteness of it all—the whiteness of accommodation, sexual relationships, and life in general—explains Rufus’ wish to

'escape'. However, it would be wrong to see this search for an alternative reality in only eschatological terms. The wish for a new place, "someplace away," where a man could be treated like a man" (75), also has a sociological and spatial dimension that is explicit in Baldwin's later writings. *Another Country*, by its very title, is suggestive of space, a space one wishes to escape to, away from where he is currently placed.

Baldwin at Home and Abroad: The Question of Subject-Matter

Baldwin had travelled and stayed for short periods all his life in two continents. It is but logical that he sees strands of modernity being shaped and articulated across cultures. The exposure to transatlantic life-worlds overshadowed by racism seems to have deeply affected his writing career. While he made a conscious effort to stay away from the form of protest and pamphleteering encoded in the literature of the period back home, he does not accept European subject matter unconditionally. Identity: its fragmentation, loss and assertion; racism: the arrangements that provide the conditions for suffering; persistent tendencies of ethno-centricism and nationalisms; diverse racisms as systemic and institutional practices are essentially American matter of inquiry and critique.

The allegation against American writers of describing the individual in opposition or isolation from America is defended by Baldwin as remaining true to experience: "Of course what the American writer is describing is his own situation. But what is *Anna Karenina* describing if not the tragic fate of the isolated individual, at odds with her time and place?" (Baldwin, *Essays* 141) The material for American and European writer differs in that in someone like Tolstoy, the set up (society at large) was fixed, if not to the writer, to the characters which populate his works. In contrast to it, the American writer has at his disposal a society where "nothing is fixed and the individual must fight for his own identity" (142). This, though a "rich confusion" (142), provides the writer with ample scope to examine the space where s/he belongs to, provided "we are willing to free ourselves of the myth of America and try to find out what is really happening here" (142). When all these experiences and realities wed, Baldwin comes up with his own style and material of writing. He conceptualises a modernity that articulates and combines the configurations of race, space, identity vis-à-vis the expatriate condition and sexualities. This creates the life of an individual divorced from myths and concerned with their internal lives.

Despite looking to establish a new genre of writing, Baldwin tries to show that African American intellectual scene is a going back to tradition, as well a heavy reliance on subsequent generations (most notably evident in Baldwin's *Dialogue* with Nikki Giovanni). In an article published in *Boston Review* titled "Baldwin's Lonely Country", Ed Pavlić makes references to an interview of Baldwin by Hakim Jamal for Free Press. Pavlić quotes specific points of the interview, one of it being something Baldwin considered very un-American: that generations depend upon each other. Despite the intensity which most characterizes Baldwin's conversations with younger writers, activists and interviewers, he made an effort to make sure that these did not look like generational battles. To quote Pavlić, "In a way most of the radical leaders in the younger generation did not expect, Baldwin respected them and he feared for their dangerous predicament, one made all the more dangerous by what he regarded as *his* generation's failures" (n.p.). Baldwin's fears are conveyed to Jamal thus:

Four years ago. It seems like a thousand years ago. And all of us four years ago hoped—though we might have had other suspicions—that we could prevent what has come. But we couldn't. We tried. We failed.

Baldwin is hinting here at an idea of remaking an image, a reworking and perhaps negation of W. E. B. Du Bois' 'double consciousness' and 'double vision'. This is against a passive admission of the image created for the African Americans by the western world and choosing to be defined by it or remaining conscious of one's existence as black and an American simultaneously. Instead, Baldwin proposes on establishing a ground of commonality among the blacks across the world for them to be seen as men and women and impose this image on the world. In the same interview with Jamal, Baldwin is riffing with the idea of Du Bois' double consciousness and makes a statement that an "American male who is capable of two warring thoughts is suspect." He, in saying thus extends the metaphor of consciousness to contradictions that might characterize any American, not necessarily black or white. In the same interview, he says:

It is the loneliest country in the world because everybody is saying to his neighbour what he thinks his neighbour wants him to say... People are not what we say they are. People are much more complex than that.

Baldwin's Paris sojourn is not an attempt to find black role models but ignorance about the existence of them in his country. He starts the conversation with Giovanni by confessing that nobody ever told him that Alexandre Dumas was a mulatto or that Pushkin was black. The American 'reality' chose to evade this. Baldwin treasures generational changes, with all its incoherence and confusion, but is very optimistic about new generations—say Giovanni's—in that the attitude of the blacks towards themselves have changed. He trusts on the concept of remaking and reinventing: "make our own definitions and begin to rule the world that way because kids white and black cannot be what they have been given" (34). Herein lies the need for redefining ways of living not for a particular race but for America as a whole that has a distinctive cultural identity.

This Space and Another

A troughful of hearts could only be a bore.

A week in Paris will ease the bite of it

All I care is to smile in spite of it.

—Jazz song.

Racialization of space is an important point to consider while reading any story that builds up from Harlem. In works like *Giovannis's Room*, *Another Country* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*, cities and streets are much more than the setting. It is a living, breathing space or character that determines the course of action, interpersonal relationships and the silences that pervade the apparently hustling quarters. In the latter two specially, as evident from the titles, space is both a wish that one wishes to escape to, as well as the imposed indifferences and silences that affect a people living in a certain space. Any deviation from the already existing connotation of the street is a wish, as seen in the story line later.

Jodi Rios, in *Black Lives and Spatial Matters* (2021) calls cities (and in this context, spaces in general) "palimpsests exposing larger currents of global conflict as well as localized histories of race making and resistance" (Rios 1). The imagination and realities of spaces mutually constitute the race and identity of the groups that live there. The spaces used by Baldwin in the novels under study range from Paris to Harlem to bars and prisons. In each of these appropriations, Baldwin's characters tread on the fine

line between inter-racial existence and racial tension, most notably manifested in a kind of silence that pervade such spaces. “The Harlem Ghetto” deals with a space that becomes a claustrophobic engagement of being clubbed together in a space that can hardly accommodate so many. As a result, people, dreams, issues of race and gender overlap and obliterate, unexamined, just like the overwhelming population:

All of Harlem is pervaded by a sense of congestion, rather like the insistent, maddening, claustrophobic pounding in the skull that comes from trying to breathe in a very small room with all the windows shut. (Baldwin, *Essays* 42)

Baldwin’s essays discussed here, though published separately at different times, have a basic tone that is similar and can be easily detected. These have a penchant for detail and give the reader an image that brings to her not flat descriptions of places he has been to and lived but makes her aware of the keen sense of misery and frustration that populates these spaces. A case in point is the litany of victim sites in *The Fire Next Time*:

In every wine stained and urine splashed highway, in every clanging ambulance bell, in every scar on the faces of the pimps and their whores, in every helpless newborn baby being born into this danger, in every knife and pistol fight on the Avenue, and in every disastrous bulletin: a cousin mother of six, suddenly gone mad, the children parcelled out here and there; an indestructible aunt rewarded for years of hard labor by a slow, agonizing death in a terrible small room; someone’s bright son blown into eternity by his own hand, another turned robber and carried off to jail. (Baldwin, *Essays* 299)

While Bigger Thomas plots and executes unlawful acts in these corners, Baldwin’s descriptions are catalogues of sorts of spaces where he lived, frequented, moved away from and returned to time and again. In fact, Baldwin delves deep into the psychology of the blacks, in America and elsewhere. He identifies pain as the common ground that links blacks in America and elsewhere, otherwise separated by continent. Their painful relations to the white world is unmistakable. on the constant relation of pain in which they stood to the white world. He says in “Princes and Powers”:

There was something which all black men held in common, something which cut across opposing points of view, and placed in the same context their widely

dissimilar experience. What they held in common was their precarious, their unutterably painful relation to the white world. What they held in common was the necessity to remake the world in their own image, to impose this image on the world, and no longer be controlled by the vision of the world, and of themselves, held by other people. What, in sum, black men held in common was their ache to come into the world as men. And this ache united people who might otherwise have been divided as to what a man should be. (152-53)

In the absence of an equal world/ space, one is walking lost in the streets, treading in the middle of the street, amidst glaring and judging and occasionally unsolicited sympathetic eyes. Due to the lack of the desired space, one leaves the city s/he grows up in or at worse, longs to escape. Rios establishes a line of connection between the modernity as propagated by Enlightenment model to ascribe sanity, civilization and culture to certain geographies and the twentieth century continuation of this in post-slavery era. Under this apparently modern practice, certain populations of certain culture and race in the United States were ascribed certain spaces. Hence, ghetto, suburbs and the inner city are not innocent terms but racialized spaces. The ghetto, so important to the life and literature of Baldwin and created as a space of “ethnic containment” (17) was soon transformed and racialized by “spatial logics” to an “urban container of ‘risk’ posed by populations of color” (Rios 18).

The cities (New York and Paris), streets (Harlem and suburbs), bars, restaurants and even the bedroom are spaces which create identities and give the reader a glimpse of the inner states of mind in the characters of Baldwin. The exotic charms of a foreign land wear out when one inhabits or frequents the less romanticised corners of places like Paris. *Giovanni's Room* and the eponymous space, David's forays into it, his self-discovery, are detailed with the deglamourized version of a Paris most often evaded in the Eiffel tower marked independent and rich Paris. The space (here, a room) is a contested site where David's fears resurface time and again, of leading an alternative sexual life with an Italian in Paris, away from his father's 'legitimate' concerns of his son having fallen in love with an woman (of course). The room that witnesses the short affair of David and Giovanni is cuddled in the poverty of Paris, the messiness a reflection of Giovanni's “regurgitated life” (Baldwin, *Giovanni's* 77). Whatever transpires in the room gives Giovanni hope, only to be shattered soon. To David, it

offers an exploration of possibilities, coupled with a hatred for Giovanni for what he has enabled him to do. Following the visual description of the room which can best be concluded as a coup with stink and rotten items and empty bottles for adornments, David's narrative voice confirms his reservations and fears of the place. His analytical eye calls up forces to do the work as one does when "gauging a mortal and unavoidable danger" (78):

I understood why Giovanni had wanted me and brought me to his last retreat. I was to destroy this room and give to Giovanni a new and better life. This life could only be my own, which, in order to transform Giovanni's, must first become a part of Giovanni's room. (78)

The room becomes the space where they could play out the contradictions of possibilities and responsibilities, and an independence (of sexuality) and caught-up-ness. The independence and joy of relatively mundane actions can be seen in the following instance. Here, David ponders over how different motives—hopes and desires in Giovanni, desperation in David—enabled him to take up roles otherwise considered unmanly in the American masculinity code:

[I] invented in myself a kind of pleasure in playing the housewife after Giovanni had gone to work...But I am not a housewife—men never can be housewives. (78)

The room plays out as a field to explore alternatives to traditional codes of behaviour. Of course, it is Giovanni's world but David's confession of the life in that room seeming to occur underwater as he underwent a "sea-change" there holds true. Somehow, he could not get rid of the hope and desire he had incited in Giovanni in that short affair and the expectations that came from these. In David's escape from the room described in his words as "backing out of a cage" to Giovanni's heart-breaking confession of what he feels of his life in this room put into perspective how spaces and their connotations change with human relations or the absence of it. Giovanni shudders at the thought of David leaving him, accuses him of never knowing or trying to understand him or his life:

You do not know, do you, what it is like to lie awake at night and wait for someone to come home? ...You do not know any of the terrible things— (123)

This utterance is imbued with the tortures in a space that was a “cage” for David and a room that Giovanni clung to in the hope of making a home. In his move to make David like the space, Giovanni had shared his idea of having a bookcase sunk in the wall. Now, breaking up, Giovanni wants to break away from this room, this city, and long for his village:

... how far away is my village and how terrible it is to be in this cold city, among people whom I hate, where it is cold and wet and never dry and hot as it was there, and where Giovanni has no one to talk to, and no one to be with, and where he has found a lover who is neither man nor woman, nothing that I can know or touch. (123)

Baldwin warns of this phase elsewhere, in “A Question of Identity” when the glitz and glamour of the legends of Paris have exhausted and have done its “deadly work,” to first stun the traveller with a deluge of freedom in a way that “he begins to long for the prison of home” (Baldwin, *Essays* 95). Home is used here in the quest for the space with innocence, devoid of questions, vagaries and virility of men. This ultimate longing and realisation of escapades as transit spaces to discovery and contentment is described in “What it Means to be an American” as a “personal day, a terrible day to which his entire sojourn has been trending” (141). This personal day is marked by the realisation that there are no untroubled countries in the world. In Giovanni’s context, Paris cripples him with a sense of loss and in David, in a sense of self-hatred. The drama that a room plays in all its confinements and looming desires shape and break lives in the novel.

In addition to this foreign space, the ‘ghetto’ plays an important character in Baldwin’s fictions. He writes a special piece on the ghetto in *Notes of a Native Son*, where he penetrates the casualty with which Harlem is exhibited to the eyes of a casual observer. Harlem lives up to Jodi Rios’s reference to ghetto as a containment zone of risk posed to the white world by the blacks. An ever-present element in this ghetto is ‘violence’. Baldwin calls this the ghetto’s chronic need—to smash something. Most often the objects chosen are each other, as in, human beings. A close second comes hatred for policemen. Police is an overwhelming presence in Harlem:

It was absolutely clear that the police would whip you and take you in as long as they could get away with it, and that everyone else—housewives, taxi-drivers,

elevator boys, dishwashers, bartenders.... would never, by the operation of any generous human feeling, cease to use you as an outlet for his frustrations and hostilities. (Baldwin, *Essays* 299)

In fact, it is not surprising that violence perpetuated as a means of control and surveillance in the ghetto takes vicious turns in the relationships of the dwellers and their characters as well. At the beginning of *Another Country*, Rufus has already led a turbulent existence and is now reduced to desperation. He remembers his girlfriend as he ambles away on the streets and a series of flashbacks slideshow in his mind: of his mother, “the rage of his father,” his sister. What this passage of remembrance also invokes is Harlem. The streets of Harlem are replete with types such as “the white policemen who had taught him how to hate,” youths dying from overdose; memories, such as his own taste of marijuana, and the ‘beat’ of Harlem: the beat, his father said, to which “a nigger lives his whole life, lives and dies” (Baldwin, *Another* 16). This beat is connotative of music, “laughter, curses, razor blades” (16). The Harlem streets come to codify a way of life for colored people, something that exhausts both Rufus and his sister Ida, who wants to escape the monotony and prescriptive life in the ghetto. To Leona, New York is an escapade. She is a southern woman divorced from her husband and looking up for possibilities in New York. On their first night together, both stare at the river view and the George Washington Bridge. Rufus is reminded of someone who died by drowning (Rufus does this to himself, later in the story). Leona, on the other hand, is overwhelmed by the sight: “‘It’s real beautiful,’ she said, ‘it’s just so beautiful.’” (27). It is with appalling contradiction that the images both of their perspectives evoke are presented to the reader.

In contrast to the mundane existence of the blacks, Vivaldo, Rufus’s white friend considers Harlem to be an adventurous retreat. Given the fact that the colour of his skin is fair, and that “contested his right to be there” (135), for it was a black specific locality, we can only conclude that the white man’s rights are not limited by a coloured majority domain too. He could use his right to be everywhere contested, and that gave him a sense of confronting danger. However, this eventually makes him realise that his wish to partake of the outward adventure in Harlem, in “a blaze of rage and self-congratulation and sexual excitement” (135) is an evasion of his inner tension. To the blacks, this is no achievement of a white man. In fact, the black gaze manifests amusement and not quite

an unkind contempt. Black eyes staring at him were just amused to find a poor (white) man who had been driven to so much trouble that he seeks comfort in Harlem. Spaces, Harlem streets for example, evoke different emotions already codified in one's racial identity. Hence these are no one adjectival construct of beautiful or sad or poor but very much determined by who inhabits and breathes in these streets.

If Beale Street Could Talk is premised on the apathy of the authority to black citizens. Several instances in the book point to the disastrous consequences of this apathy. For example, when Tish resists the sexual advances of a white man and her boyfriend Fonny picks up a fight with him, the police officer frames Fonny on charges of raping a Puerto Rican woman. In another instance, a white officer had lost his chance to frame the colored Fonny for a fight that ensued between Fonny and the one who made sexual slurs at Tish. The arbitrariness of black arrests is also seen when a falsely accused Daniel narrates his ordeal of being accused of stealing a car he had never seen: "I guess they just happened to need a car-thief that day. Sure wish I knew whose car it was. I hope it wasn't no black dude's car, though" (Baldwin, *Beale* 95). Charges—amounting to severe punishment—are made taking into serious concern the race of an individual.

When Tish and Fonny rent a new space to live together, they are assured of the safety with the neighbours but warned against the police: "Watch out for the cops. They're murder" (117). Later, when the couple was walking in one of those streets, up Sixth avenue "with all those fucking flags on it" (118) and were at the receiving end of the police attempting to frame blacks in a white crowded street, the warning made more sense. These streets and the perpetual quest of an incorrigibly racist policing looking for a black 'catch' drive Fonny to his ultimate despair in being framed for a crime he did not commit. As Hayward, the lawyer says: "If Fonny were white, it wouldn't be a case at all" (105). A pregnant Tish, looking at the man she loved so much in the prison and wishing "I hope that nobody has ever had to look at anybody they love through glass" is a victim of a system that employs policing as a mechanism when it can no longer achieve the desired outcome (racial violence). The worst victims are people who exercise their basic rights in daring to move between places, build their own identity and achieve a sense of dignity versus a system that wants to see them as racialised objects of contempt, prejudice and inequality:

And that's a crime, in this fucking free country. You're supposed to be somebody's nigger. And if you are nobody's nigger, you're a bad nigger: and that's what the cops decided when Fonny moved downtown. (33)

In a system that thrives on ownership and control, men like Fonny in the streets, holding to their own, are a threat. Urban streets in this case, which should have been levellers—in terms of the anonymity and randomness of the population on the road at a given point of time—encroach upon lives in a way that is both brutal and racially informed. The modern urban streets hence do not allow the black man to avail the benefits of modernity—its charms ideally being acting as an equalizing and democratic agent—and hence the search for alternatives. The alternatives here are often spaces which have a clear black majority populating it.

Self-discovery vis-à-vis Expatriate Condition

Baldwin's self-description as a transatlantic commuter informs his engagements with a combination of cosmopolitanism and social issues. While it is difficult to club his non-fiction writings into small heads, there are essays, etc., spatially classified. These can be clustered as Paris essays. Paris remains the place he would escape to. His novels like *Another Country*, *Giovanni's Room*, are set partially or completely in Paris and these essays can be read in conjunction with his fictional writings. While sexuality as a contested domain pervades many of these fictional works, these essays try to establish a truce between obscurity and recognition. Baldwin's perception of race is dialectical: he strives to abolish, or to put it more neatly, give away the obsessions with whiteness and blackness. The egalitarian ideals of modernity are best emphasized in Baldwin in his dismissal of categories. Categories—sexual, racial, gender and the like—never impressed him. His view on 'colouring' people is both unorthodox and telling:

People invent categories to feel safe. White people invented black people to give white people identity. (Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue* 88)

This hinges on the idea that a powerful/dominant/majority group almost always needs an 'other' for self-validation. It is as if the identity of one depends on the other. Brutality in one's own land is supplemented by misrepresentation/ underrepresentation in a foreign one. Paris remains for Baldwin an escape, a setting and a character. The major action of

Giovannis's Room takes place in Paris. *Another Country* travels between America and France in depicting parallel stories of sexual encounters, fleeting relationships and memories of love. In his Paris essays though, he highlights the identitarian politics that assume a different role as soon as one shifts to a different country. His identity and status are both ambivalent. In Europe, these are subject to what the newspapers report and myths propagate. The result is an alienation that is characterized by a remote awareness of what they might be talking about, but which he has never lived: “seeing one’s backyard reproduced with such fidelity, but in such a perspective that it becomes a place which one has never seen or visited, which never has existed, and which never can exist” (Baldwin, *Essays* 87). The European adventure then, fills the African American with fictive elements of his own country which he cannot relate with. This is different from an insider’s view—here, the African American living in America—and can be taken as a distant observer’s perspective without experiencing things first-hand.

Interestingly, for Baldwin, Paris is the arena where black-white relations or the depravity of it are pronounced and understood. James Miller’s analysis of Paris Essays builds up from the parallels within the experience of Americans at home and abroad: “Baldwin develops his idea that the American experience of alienation from European and African culture and history is expressive of American selfhood as a whole” (Miller 59). Baldwin’s analysis of one’s identity as an American pertains, paradoxically, to the common cultural heritage of the whites and the blacks. This commonality is more pronounced in a foreign land—say, Paris—where the relationship between Africans and African Americans is a pointer to the relationship between black and white American. The dynamics of exchange changes in Paris:

His white countrymen, by and large, fail to justify his fears, partly because the social climate does not encourage an outward display of racial bigotry, partly out of their awareness of being ambassadors, and finally, I should think, because they are themselves relieved at being no longer forced to think in terms of color. (Baldwin, *Essays* 86)

In Paris, conversations between black and white compatriots—exiles, expatriates, settlers, tourists, among others—veer to safer and innocent grounds like the “overrated impressiveness of the Eiffel Tower” (87). However, the battle for identity perpetuates for the black American even away from home, except that in Paris it involves accepting

one's reality as an American: for that renders uniqueness to his experience and hence demands recognition. The African American's experience is different from other colored people he meets in Paris. He cannot deny the inevitability of his relationship to the white American when he considers aspects of the American experience and thereby, the American identity. The African Negro that the African American meets in Paris is essentially a colonial, "someone abruptly and recently uprooted" (88), driven by a responsibility which unites his fellow colonials: "His country must be given-or it must seize-its freedom" (88). United by a common motive, the African in Paris shares a common language and sentiment with colored people in their colonial identities. Even as black people meet, the American experience of the black American is entirely different: the American Negro is crippled with an alienation from his people and his past; whereas the African has endured cruelty and injustice and share a common bond of suffering. The American longs for acceptance in a culture where the standards of beauty are fixed; the African has not had to face this "ache" (89). The expatriate condition also determines relationships, attitude and conversations between the white and black Americans. What in America is a case of institutionalised racism becomes in Paris interactions permeated by silence and ambivalence. For once, Baldwin assumes, the white American is relieved that he need not think of his colored countrymen in racial terms because the social climate of Paris does not encourage this.

The difference of experiences necessitates the acknowledgement of a hybrid American identity that precedes the African one. This hybridity is characterized by reflection and repetition of the white American traits of tensions, terrors and tenderness. These conflicting emotions are mediated by the indispensability of the white American existence in the African American identity:

Now he is bone of their bone, flesh of their flesh; they have loved and hated and obsessed and feared each other and his blood is in their soil. Therefore he cannot deny them, nor can they ever be divorced. (89)

The recognition of this hybrid identity no way renders an African American less of an African, or challenge his black identity. In fact, much of his efforts are directed in establishing himself in relation to his past. This precisely is the American experience: the incessant effort of the blacks at establishing and articulating their black heritage and the white American's failed —and most of the times, uninitiated attempts—at recognizing

and acknowledging his people that form the collective American identity. In the alienation from the past as well as their own people is the American experience most unified and defined. This provides a new direction to the contours of scholarly inquiry of racism. Black and white American alienations and anxieties are the foci of the American problematics of selfhood. To be constituent parts (African American and white American) of an identity, i.e., American, but refusing to acknowledge this renders the selves to be marked by alienation and anxiety. Baldwin's thesis on modernity strives towards a cognizance of the American self that acknowledges the presence of the 'other' in it. That is to say, the black acknowledges the white presence and vice versa—what he calls (as earlier mentioned) “bone of their bone, flesh of their flesh”.

In a lifetime of racial conditioning, albeit here in a foreign shore, the white 'brother' starts regarding his dark countrymen as “a needy and deserving martyr or as the soul of rhythm”, and hence any communication tinged with sympathy. This uncomfortable condition of addressing or falling back on a common cultural heritage must give way to something safe to discuss. The American Negro too uses this opportunity of safe conversation, for he understands the futility of conveying to any one countryman of the racial injustice he has faced all his life or addressing it and expecting that things will be any better by communicating.

Baldwin's understanding of the relationship of black and Europeans in Paris is useful here. The European understanding of American experience is determined by the narratives provided by media in general to which the African American feels a stranger. His past “has not been simply a series of ropes and bonfires and humiliations, but something vastly more complex” (87-88). This implies that while his past has been much worse, it is also much better than that, at least in the light of the European's assumed and shared perception of the black American as a potent site of sympathy. This notion overrides any recognition of the black as an American; his race takes precedence over his American identity. The repercussion of this unsolicited sympathy and pity is the age-old struggle with identity. Across continents, the struggle is uniform and real: in this case the acceptance of his identity as an American. This however should not be misread as an attempt to forfeit his black identity. In fact, attempts are directed at articulating and recognizing this identity. Privileging national (American) over racial (black) does not presuppose a hated self that comes from belonging to a particular race but embracing this

'fact' in the articulation of a national identity. This reality of American identity is shaped by co-existence of two diverse groups, yet coming together in their shared nationhood to form a common American identity:

Dimly and for the first time, there begins to fall into perspective the nature of the roles they have played in the lives and history of each other. Now he is bone of their bone, flesh of their flesh; they have loved and hated and obsessed and feared each other and his blood is in their soil. Therefore he cannot deny them, nor can they ever be divorced. (89)

The search for identity is a perpetual quest, and the one intention that has remained consistent in the voyage of self-discovery since generations. America remains plagued by the ghetto, anxiety, bitterness and guilt of its citizens, which pose a stranglehold on this quest.

In "A Question of Identity" Baldwin delves deeper into the American identity reshaped and pronounced owing to a stint in Europe. After all the initial charms that Paris has to offer in the American student's (this category most explored because of Baldwin's proximity and lived experience) romantic imagery of Paris, he tries to evade a "shock of reality" (93) that juxtaposes his image of Paris that he clings to and would most possibly like to believe. However, when reality and imagination confront each other and the expectations of a "Paris honeymoon" (95) are jaded, he can clearly decipher the seductions and disappointments with the same. For the Paris accommodation facilities, so gilded in photographs, inciting artistic pursuits are reduced to ill equipped rooms of towering expenses. History sinks into dirt and wretchedness, artistic pursuits receive a fact check of anything similar that could be pursued back in his country. However, for the time, when he thinks to bask in the freedom that Paris has to offer, he is confronted by the Frenchmen himself. They, much like the other legends about Paris, sink into indifference due to their own arrogant display of behavior: "it is perfectly possible to be enamoured of Paris while remaining totally indifferent, or even hostile to the French" (94).

Baldwin does not ignore—and no critical discussion can possibly do so—the white Americans and the concept of whiteness or a white world, even when away from America. While he consciously avoids the practice social-protest literature of his

contemporaries and immediate writer-ancestors, he does not believe that it is the only mode through which the American society and its ills can be dissected. Baldwin makes persistent efforts at addressing the root of the problems of identity as manifestation of the American experience as a whole. The distorted image of white Americans of themselves, as a progeny of Europe, as “the creators of civilization” (127) halt any reformulation of multi-ethnic nationalism. By refusing to acknowledge the African American identity and experience as part of American narrative of history, the white bask in an illusion of a white world. Any deviation from that position, leading to a recognition of the African American “as one of themselves” (127), would naturally hurt that illusion. These ideas developed in “Stranger in the Village” are conceived by the public reactions to the sight of a black in a Swiss village. The anecdote refers to the wonder-shock elicited in the villagers on first seeing a colored man, the shouts of “Neger” (123) by children in the streets. These shouts take him back to the streets where he has lived in America, and where the shouts of “Nigger” (124) are not uncommon. However, there is a gulf between these two streets and the sentiments he evokes in people, a “dreadful abyss” (123). While in a strange village, this exclamation involves wonder, the same cannot be said to echo in streets where he was born: “I am a stranger here. But I am not a stranger in America and the same syllable riding on the American air expresses the war my presence has occasioned in the American soul” (124). At home—in America that is to say—the wonder of the Swiss streets is replaced by the discomfort that plagues the white American with the presence of his black brother. Awe is replaced by racial slurs; strangeness is replaced by the discomfort with familiarity that emanates from the knowledge that the black and the white constitute a common American identity.

The ‘white’ American’s utopian longing for a white world is treated with mordant humour. Baldwin attributes this to an illusion in American white men to recover “European innocence” (Baldwin, *Essays* 129): an imagination of times when blacks did not exist in this white utopia of sorts. This fantasy is ironical in view of the fact that the American experience is unlike any experiences of other white men in the globe. The refusal to acknowledge the truth of the American identity, while being aware of it all the time, fractures the white men’s own sense of self. It demands no superpower to comprehend the fact that “interracial drama acted out on the American continent has not only created a new black man, it has created a new white man, too” (129). The uniqueness of white American identity is marked by indelible influence that black lives

have had on him and vice versa. These strategies of denial and evasion fracture the American identity as a whole and spawn struggles, the very ones which they were running away from while moving to this side of the Atlantic. A statement by Baldwin on white and whiteness and the prejudices it entails, is made by him in an *Esquire* interview (July 1968 issue). He refers to white as not a colour, but an attitude; and lack, a condition, on being asked if it was a state of mind too. It is significant that on being asked who among the white community can talk to the black community and be accepted, Baldwin's answer is that anyone who does not 'think' himself white can.

The white consciousness he refers to is replete with prejudices of color and is a perpetrator of systemic oppression. The assertion (and problematics) of an all-white America, by leaving a blank in terms of African American existence, needs solution from the oppressed but the oppressor. This negation and denial are expressed with metaphors of silence and darkness as characteristic of the minds of the colored. When Baldwin asserts that the Negro exists "in the darkness of our minds" (Baldwin, *Essays* 19), he refers to the logic of exclusion. So he suggests an alternative: "to make it blank if one cannot make it white" (20). It is necessary here to look at Baldwin's views on "European hangovers" in his interview with Hakim Jamal. Here Baldwin refers to American white folks who thought they had more in common with villagers in Scotland and Ireland than with blacks who have lived with them in their neighbourhoods for centuries. Baldwin's indignation with white Americans borders on extreme sarcasm and close understanding that comes long and deep thinking. He sees the hollowness of the identity formations and makes a prophesy that must be seen in conjunction with his views on black modernity: "Either the West will revise them or the West will perish" (Pavlić, "Baldwin's Lonely Country" n.p.).

Baldwin attributes this crushing or limited definition of reality to the West. Seeing one culture as superior to another and the concomitant subjugation of one by the other is contrary to Baldwin's thought. Baldwin terms it as a shock that America, which is the African American's birthplace has not evolved in its entire history a space for them within its system of reality. If the American Dream is the recognition and participation of diverse cultures in its history, then treating the Negro culture as nothing on its own but an object of missionary charity and not recognising the Negro contribution to America is a denial of 'reality'. Baldwin is aware of the disillusionment of the blacks with the

American Dream. Nationality and allegiance are considered as synonymous to the blacks, but nowhere are they entitled to the rights and privileges that come with these two. At times when there are attempts at validating black existence, it comes, as he cites, in the manner of Robert Kennedy's proclamation that one might hope for a Negro President in the next forty years. This ironically, is a direct refusal of the people and culture who have been there for 400 years. This statement is met with by two responses: the whites see it as a grand emancipatory statement. In Harlem though, it is treated with contempt and scorn. Questions linger when such apparently 'democratic' statements are made—what stopped America from having and endorsing a black President until then?

Sexuality and Masculinity in Modernity

Baldwin's essays on his visit to the South, sexuality, gender roles are a portrayal of experiences in his growing up years as well as an adult. "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood" published in *Playboy* magazine brings up Baldwin's notions of sexuality, human behaviour and possibilities. He says that every human contains the spiritual resources of both sexes. In that sense, he argues, everyone is androgynous because "each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other- male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white (Baldwin, *Essays* 828). However, it is precisely this idea of the naturalness of the androgynous that is treated with contempt and labelled "freak". In the essay which starts with citing the dictionary meaning "androgynous"—to have both male and female characteristics—he goes on differentiate between physiological specificities that render hermaphrodite as a combination of the male and the female, and human beings in general who, in a visceral capacity, are constituted by the "spiritual resources" of both male and female. A refusal to acknowledge the normalcy of the androgynous nature of human beings and suppression are attributed to the American ideal of sexuality, rooted as it is, in the American ideal of masculinity. Freaks are so called and treated thus because they deviate from the norm, problematize social roles defined by one's sex and "cause to echo, deep within us, our most profound terrors and desires" (828). People coming out of the closet, blacks overachieving—here Baldwin has Michael Jackson in mind—seem to create a chaos in the world, and in America precisely, chaos is associated with colour by heteronormative keepers of order. These keepers, both people and ideologies, seem to be sure of what the world needs to keep order intact. As suggested earlier, Baldwin shows in *Giovanni's Room* what problems plague homosexual relations.

His refusal to ‘mask’ homoerotic tendencies was met with both criticism and questions. In a 1984 interview with Richard Goldstein, Baldwin reflects back on the ‘risk’ taken: “The question of human affection, of integrity, in my case, of becoming a writer, are all linked with the question of sexuality. Sexuality is only a part of it. I don’t know if it is the most important part, but it is indispensable” (qtd. in Pavlić 45). Baldwin’s decision to write about his sexuality was questioned time and again. Baldwin replies that he did not have a lot of choice. *Giovanni* came out of something that frightened and tormented him—the question of his own sexuality. He also saw it as a process of simplification because nobody could blackmail him now that he has revealed it himself (47). He reflects on it as a choice made of not having a choice, one rooted in the role an artist’s personal life plays in their work, and as a bold move by a black author with an already contested position in the American culture.

As a modern voice of his times and prophetic in his incredible relevance even today, Baldwin engaged with the strands of racism and sexuality as categories that stunt individual expression and further inequality. The idea of sexuality and fashioning one’s writing according to it can be read in the light of Baldwin’s modernity which is an antithesis to the reproductive logic of sexuality. This is attributed to black nationalism: “The call for the reproduction of the nation through heterosexual and mono-racial sex is one that is fundamental to black nationalist politics” (Dunning 97). A corollary of the Eurocentric version of nationalism, black nationalism therefore, while calling attention to the male body as the site of suffering ignores feminist concerns of how women are affected in the process. Masculinities, defined in the nationalist discourse, purports to configure reproductive abilities as enabling and furthering it. Hence, intercourse that does not result in reproduction is considered crippling in the context of black masculinity. Stefanie Dunning elaborates on this when she extends the supposed reproductive aim from producing blackness, vis-à-vis black individuals to maleness. Endorsement of homosexuality/ gayness amounts to death of the race by this logic. For, if white supremacy is annihilation for the race, gayness is a metaphor for whiteness, something that stops the perpetuation of the race. Within such defined parameters of masculinity, homosexuality is not just frowned upon, but considered a threat to black nationalistic discourse.

The propensity to invent clear cut categories and make Europe a globally dominant power post the Industrial Revolution, commercialized not just money making avenues but the roles of women and men too: “Men became the propagators, or perpetrators, of property, and women became the means by which that property was protected and handed down” (Baldwin, *Essays* 815). While this is nothing new in terms of division of labour, it gave undue license to exploit a part of the world, enslave populations of a race among many other things that followed. This hyper masculinity, its associated traits of ownership and exploitation manifested itself in interpersonal relationships, in the confines of one’s homes too. While the expression of sexuality (outside heteronormativity) is curbed in subscribing to the western ideal of reproductive sexual preferences, entertaining the idea of the ‘androgynous’ is also obviated. It is to no surprise that men in Baldwin’s fiction are the prototypes of hyper masculine rake who lead fleeting lives of casual sexual encounters to violent and abusive relationships to a loss of identity.

It is imperative to return to that moment in *Another Country*, when Rufus decodes to Vivaldo why Leona loves the colored folks so much, and why she is still with him. In this episode, there is an examination of the crushing of individuality in the ‘precinct’ of masculinity:

‘She loves the colored folks so much,’ said Rufus, ‘sometimes I just can’t stand it. You know all the chick knows about me? The only thing she knows?’ He put his hand on his sex, brutally, as though he would tear it out, and seemed pleased to see Vivaldo wince. (Baldwin, *Another* 75)

The centrality of ‘his sex’, in Rufus here, is extended to all black men in *No Name in the Street*. Baldwin makes a careful distinction between men and women, the price the former pays for walking, “for men are not women, and a man’s balance depends on the weight he carries between his legs” (Baldwin, *Essays* 392). It is the failure to ‘honour’ this in another man that ensues chaos. Familial relationships fraught with violence are attributed to the relationship of black men and white masters since colonial times: “in giving the masters every conceivable sexual and commercial license, it also emasculated them of any human responsibility- “to their women, to their children, to their wives or to themselves” (391). The consequences of these extend to Baldwin’s present, “until this hour” (391). While most men choose women to debase, white men also choose black

men to debase. The result is owing to sexual despair, “when sexual despair comes to power, the sexuality of the object is either a threat or a fantasy” (391). In the South, when Baldwin witnesses ‘heroic’ black men walking on the streets with a “marvelously mocking, salty authority” (392), a realization dawns upon him of the ‘price’ that each needs to pay for that walk:

Their fights came out of that, their laughter came out of that, their curses, their tears, their decisions, their so menaced loves, their courage, and even their cowardice- and perhaps especially the stunning and unexpected changes they could play on these so related strings- their music, their dancing: it all came from the center. (392)

The obsession to attribute male violence to what happens to a man outside—in the streets, in trying to live up to expectations of masculinity— is dealt with by Baldwin all his life. While it is a fertile ground of exploration, it reduces women to lives which are dictated and determined rather than lived and always at the mercy of men. Though there are a multitude of characters that thrive in *Another Country* amidst racial and sexual tensions and Rufus himself ends up tragically, he has his moments of glory in being ‘served’ by a white southern woman. The first time Leona stays with Rufus, he gloats over this servile southern woman in front of his white friend Vivaldo:

Ain’t she a splendid specimen of Southern womanhood? Rufus asked. ‘Down yonder, they teach their womenfolks to *serve*.’ (34)

Leona, instead of being infuriated by this, acknowledges that down south, they are taught nothing more. It points to the racially segregated culture of the south, where women’s lives—irrespective of race—are tied to servitude and play the role of a servant in the reproductive project of the world. It must be mentioned that Leona is a divorced mother who is kept away from her child after she has failed to live up to the expectations of a good mother. The scene ends with some discomfort on the face of Vivaldo, and Rufus praising her that she does not need to know anything else as long as she knows how to make a man happy.

Since in the African American context, racial tensions take precedence gendered relationships have been glossed over. In Baldwin though—ranging from his inclusion of

homosexual characters as well as hypermasculine bullies and oppressed women—alternative sexualities and gender politics that border on racial identity find expression. He attributes the violence in most heterosexual relationships, with women being the constant victims of all sorts of abuse to a brand of masculinity that weighs heavy on black men. This brand subsequently finds women as constant objects of abuse.

Ida in *Another Country* wants to leave Harlem as soon as her brother Rufus dies: “I knew I couldn’t stay there, I’d grow old like they were, suddenly, and I’d end up like all the other abandoned girls who can’t find anyone to protect them” (406). The vulnerability of female lives is apparent here. The onus is on both men and women to solve the dangers that women expose themselves to, within their families as well as outside of it. In *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin traces back the hypermasculine rake prototype to the days of slavery, where not just black men were owned, but black women and children too. The result of this “money making conspiracy” was that, in giving “the masters every conceivable sexual and commercial license” (391) the system emasculated them of human and familial responsibilities to women, children, wives. This is reiterated in *Dialogue* in his reference to erosion of man’s sexuality and the consequent inability to love (40). Nikki Giovanni, in this conversational piece, acknowledges that the black men are mistreated and brutalized by white men in a way that is inhuman. However, how that comes to justify his violence towards his family—including his wife and children—is incomprehensible to her. This becomes a strange phenomenon: “I don’t like white people and I am afraid of black men. So what do you do? It’s a sad condition” (45). This explains black men’s estranged relationships at home, perhaps even Baldwin’s father’s relationship devoid of any filial affection.

Conclusion

Baldwin’s meandering from the protest fiction of his day creates a body of work where the psychological battles of an African American in terms of both race and gender receive emphasis. The contours of scholarly inquiry receive a new perspective in Baldwin, and in spite of its limitations, just like the ones earlier to him, it opens up possibilities to explore: mostly in the realms of gender, sexuality and masculinity. An African American’s difficulties in coming to terms with one’s self and sexuality are overarching concerns in these writings, as also the importance of personal and public spaces, the latter ranging from bedrooms, cafes and streets to foreign lands. The

explorations help redefine interpersonal relationships and a quest for freedom alike. Baldwin interrogates existing and emerging models of modernity that privilege 'white' determinations of masculinity and nationalism as well as authority over spaces like urban streets. In relating violent and turbulent relationships, he traces a genealogy of 'black' violence to days of slavery. The woman question remains largely unaddressed in his conversational pieces, as it places male sexuality and the racism behind gender roles at the centre of black lives.