CHAPTER II
THE OPPRESSION OF THE BLACKS:
A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The verdict of "Not Guilty" in the Rodney King Trial shocked America and ignited passions throughout the nation on April 29, 1992. "The case of the brutal beating of black motorist Rodney King by four Los Angeles police officers, had triggered off a long-drawn debate on racism and police brutality since March 3, 1991. The twelve jurors (none of them Black) were in fear of their lives and amazed at the rampage that was the result of their verdicts."¹ The riots claimed fifty one lives, injured over two thousand and the damage was estimated to be more than $ 700 million. Despite America's claim to modern liberal outlook and equality for all, news like this has often focussed attention on the underlying social tension between the Black and white Americans.

In the last decade, the struggle of the Black American for equality and justice has taken on a new dramatic world-wide significance. Spurred by the rise of nationalism in the newly liberated African nations and "the pervasive influence of mass media, there had been a rediscovery of black Culture and a growing bond uniting black people throughout the world."² This had given the American Blacks a new sense of kinship and a feeling of purpose, a new larger Black identity. Moreover, the Negro's perception of the significance and historic weight of his struggle provided a further resource for feelings of self worth."³

³ Ibid., p.208.
1. *The Beginning of Slavery*

America is, indeed, a nation in which except for the native Indians, the inhabitants have migrated from almost every part of the world. But, the fact remains, that the Blacks were the most oppressed and persecuted race that lived there. Yet, they greatly influenced the economic and social history of the nation and "provided as much of the heritage of the American continent as any other group," as claimed by the anthropologist, Paul Bohannan. The history of the Blacks (or the Negroes as they were called) in America begins with the rediscovery of Africa by the Portuguese. While many of the people, who came to America were persecuted or outlawed or were brought as indentured labour, the Blacks were captured and dragged in as slaves. Peter M. Bergman relates how the first of these slaves were bought and brought by Antam Goncalvez, a captain in the realm of Henry, the Navigator in 1452. According to him, Goncalvez captured two or three Moors of noble birth on the African Coast. These Moors offered as ransom, ten Black male and female slaves. The ransom was accepted and the Negroes were brought to Lisboa and sold at the market there. These legendary ten Negroes represented the beginning of the African slave trade. In the ecclesiastical annals of Ortiz de Zuniga under the date 1474, it is related as an astonishing experience that Negro slaves abounded in the city of Lisboa and the tithes levied on them produced considerable gains for the royal revenue. In 1482, the Portuguese built the first slave-trading port Sao Jorge de Mina, on the African Gold Coast.

Spain and Portugal provided the basic conditions for the institution of slavery. At the time of the discovery of America, they were economically poor countries without substantial manufacture. The expulsion of Moslems and Jews at about the same time deprived the countries of their most useful and

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active population. The great steel works of Toledo, the leather factories of Cordoba and the intensive plantations of olive and fruit trees were replaced by grazing land for sheep. Thus, land and manufacture, that had been fruitful, were ruined in order to fit the ambitions of the very rich and the Church. Robbery and plunder became the basic economy of the powerful countries of Spain and Portugal. In 1493, by a Papal Bull the New World was divided between these two countries. This division was made without any geographical knowledge. This caused an economic revolution, which was based on the new system of human exploitation, called slavery, and also on the gold and silver they had looted. Thus, slavery, which Marx called “Primitive Accumulation,” which began in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, turned Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of Black skins.

2. Pre-Colonial Africa

The territory from which the vast majority of Blacks came to the New World stretched for about three thousand miles from the Senegal River to the southern tip of what was then the Portuguese Angola. The people inhabiting this area were of different physical features, culture and even spoke in a variety of languages. Much historical information has now been unearthed about Africa’s pre-colonial past. Viewing tribal Africa as it was in 1500, modern historians have observed that, it was not a scene of social chaos and stagnation, nor were its people like retarded children. The popular myth “depicts the European, carrying the blessings of civilization to naked savages who sat under trees, filed their teeth and waited for fruit to drop into their hands.” In the light of modern research such myths have been subverted and it has been established that the inhabitants were far from barbarians or idiots.

On the west coast of Africa from where came most of the ancestors of American Blacks, there were complex institutions like the extended family groupings, village states and territorial empires. Most of these units had armies, courts and internal revenue departments similar to those of the modern state. Melville J. Herskovits, anthropologist, remarks that “not even the kingdoms of Peru and Mexico could mobilize resources and concentrate power more effectively than could some of these African monarchies, which are more to be compared with the Europe of the Middle Ages than referred to the common conception of the primitive state.”

Agriculture was their main occupation, although they also lived by fishing and herding. Those who lived near the river, were fishermen or boat makers and those who were adjacent to vast grasslands were shepherds tending goats and cattle. There were skilled blacksmiths, potters, shoemakers and weavers. The natives traded not only through the barter system, but also through money system based on the cowrie shell. Iron was known and used by Africans long before the Europeans knew anything about it. “With simple bellows, charcoal fires, the Africans melted iron and manufactured beautiful implements.”

The common African man was illiterate, but he was taught history and even science by word of mouth by trained narrators. They also learned to observe nature and their surroundings very minutely. The African groups had a monotheistic belief in a single High God, whose power dominated the universe. Religion played an important role; and statues and masks of ivory, bronze or wood were necessary for the performance of religious and magical ceremonies. Each group or village had its own exclusive deity.

Family, which was the core of society, was very often based on a matrilineal system which means that descent was traced through the mother.

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., p.23
Polygamy was common, though some tribes practised monogamy. Spinsters were rare and prostitution was almost unknown. Some of the tribes were acquainted with the modern practice of birth control. Bantu people believed that it was not good for women to give birth to more than one child in a three year period. Centuries of inbreeding had produced different types of Africans; some short and broad nosed, others tall with straight hair and aquiline noses. They were chocolate, asphalt, persimmon or cream in colour. Art and culture had a role in their day to day life. Tribal dances were held whether it was to observe a death or to petition for a good crop.

It was with this precious land, Africa, that the Portuguese traded in gold, pepper and ivory. But, their greatest attraction became the Black people themselves, whom they sold for huge profit to the newly settled lands across the Atlantic. For nearly a century, the Portuguese were successful in monopolizing this trade, but in the beginning of late fifteen hundred there was strong competition from the Swedes, the Danes, the Dutch, the French and the English. During mid 1600 the Dutch became the leaders in carrying slave trade, only to be defeated by England later.

The merchants of England had petitioned to King Edward IV, in 1481, to get the Pope’s permission to travel to the west coast of Africa, but the Portuguese had managed to persuade Edward to dissuade them from making a trip. But, Queen Elizabeth and her successors wanted the huge profit of slave trade. They also knew that Black labour would highly increase the yields from their colonial possessions. So, they tried to encourage slave trade as much as they could. Whatever their nationality, various slave-trading companies operated in a similar manner. First, they obtained a grant of charter from their sovereigns. The next step was to fill the ship with goods like textiles, metalware and rum, and send them to their forts and stations in Africa. The company’s traders at these stations would then trade with the native chiefs, the
principal demand being, the slaves.

The Africans had long been familiar with slavery but they did not have any idea of the long-range consequences of this trade with Europeans. In pre-European Africa, slavery carried no stigma of innate inferiority. A slave could often rise to the position of great trust and honour. Moreover, slavery was carried on only on a very small scale. But, with the coming of European traders, in "the span of three centuries and a half, west coast Africa would lose from, 18,000,000 to 24,000,000 of its best physical specimens, the only kind the slave traders wanted." The African potentates could never have dreamt how the Europeans would formulate racial theories to justify slavery and claim that Africans were doomed to be slaves, because of their inborn backwardness.

3. The Journey to the New World

When the slaves had been gathered, they were driven aboard the ship, where they were packed tightly often with no space for movement or even to breathe freely, one slave being chained to the other. The first stop was West Indies. The forty days voyage across the Atlantic, called the Middle Passage, required great endurance by the human cargo to reach alive. The ailments like small-pox, scarcity and often total lack of food and water, the unbearably cruel treatment of the master figures and other inconveniences took a high toll. "The slave trade" says, Lerone Bennet Jr., "was a kind captain forcing his suicide-minded passengers to eat by breaking their teeth, though as he said, he was naturally compassionate." It was "a bishop sitting on an ivory chair on a wharf in the Congo and extending his fat hand in wholesale baptism of slaves.

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who were roomed beneath him, going in chains to the slave ships.”¹¹ The slave trade “was a greedy King, raiding his own villages to get slaves to buy brandy.”¹²

The slaves traders were masters in the art of torturing the slaves in the most inhuman manner, for their slightest default to obey them. Those who refused to be subdued were whipped, slashed with knives, hung, thrown into the sea or killed by cutting the throat. Sometimes, the slaves rose in mutiny, which resulted in the loss of human lives. Even at present, the Afro-Americans are often compelled to protest against racial injustice. The slaves were first taken to the West Indies, which served as a sort of seasoning post, where they were conditioned to the harsh routines of slave life. It required great stamina to work in the sugar fields from sun-up to sun-down; the food was bad and never sufficient and the treatment was worse than that on the ocean-voyage. If the slaves were strong enough to survive the torture for two or three years they were sold to the British colonies along the Atlantic sea board. Men, women and children were dragged to the auction board and sold like cattle. Children were torn from their mothers, husbands from wives and thus they reached the American soil in utter desperation.

There is enough documentary evidence to suggest that these first generation African-Americans were accorded a relatively high-status, at least they had the same industrial and economic freedom as the white indentured servants. The colonial courts reveal records of Blacks, who were given their freedom after their contract of indenture expired. One such case was that of Andrew Moore, who migrated to Virginia and bound himself out for a term of five years. In October 1673, the General Court “orders that the said Moore be free from his said master, and that the said Mr. Light pay him Corne and

¹¹ Ibid.
¹² Ibid.
Clothes, according to the customs of the country and four hundred pounds tobacco and caske for his service done him since he was free and pay costs."

As the Blacks started arriving, they assigned definite status to them and many were sold for a period of time only and were treated in all respects like the white indentured servants. They worked together in the same fields, Blacks and Whites, men and women shared the same huts and developed strong bonds of comradeship. They worked together, revolted together, ran away, married and had children without any prejudice about race or colour. The words "Whites and Blacks" were not even in use then. The legal documents identified White people as Englishmen or Christians. They had no concept of themselves as White and superior to the Blacks. The first Blacks were called Black moors, Moors, Negroes and Negars. The word "Negro" a Spanish and Portuguese term for Black, with its derogatory sense, did not come into use, until late in the seventeenth century. Thus, even the language was exploited to distort and dismantle the Black self.

4. *Slavery Sanctioned*

Until the 1660s, at least, the system contained the possibility of Blacks continuing as indentured servants. But, the world-wide demand for sugar and tobacco and the development of a capitalist planting technique, favoured the rise of slavery. At first, the rulers of the colonies were indifferent to the colour or nationality of their labourers. They tried to enslave white men, native Indians and Black men alike. But, white people often received the protection of their government and sympathy from other white people. They could escape and easily blend with the white majority. The Indians also knew the country well. They could escape and take shelter under the protection of their kith and kin, who were only a little distance away and the Indians were weak and would

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13 ibid., p.39
easily fall ill and die under the harsh conditions of slavery. Therefore Indians proved more to be a liability than an asset. Due to these reasons, both the Indians and Whites were excluded from slavery.

The Africans on the other hand, were strong and could endure a lot of hardships. They could not escape and hide, since their black colour gave them away quickly. They were not protected by any organized European government. They could be purchased at cheaper prizes and the supply seemed to be inexhaustible. Thus, the colonial rulers of America encouraged by the slave trade royalists of London and unhindered by their church fell into a way of thinking that would slowly lead the way to a system of human slavery based on the distribution of melanin in the human skin. Virginia and Maryland were the first colonies to enact laws that made the Black people slaves and forbade intermarriage. Under these laws children born of a slave woman would also be slaves. The slaves became the property of the white masters, with no rights, over their property, wives or children. America thus became divided into Black-American slaves and white-American masters, with an ever widening gap between them. This division demanded the destruction of all the bonds of community between Black and White people, even with the white indentured servants. The newly enacted laws also demanded the creation of an ideology of racism that justified the subordination of Blacks.

In the South where slavery took deep roots there were congressmen, editors, Professors and bishops, who developed an elaborate pro-slavery argument, denying that slavery was evil. They contended that the "Negro" was "biologically inferior and unable to handle the responsibilities of a free man." Some even claimed that the "Negro" was happier when he had a master or mistress to care for him. Instances of slavery in the Bible were quoted to ease the guilt feelings of the white people and to stop them from voicing their

doubts publicly. Observers from the North or from across the Atlantic were persuaded that the slave population were better clothed, fed and housed than the working population in poor countries. But, many observers failed to be convinced by these arguments. They could understand the keen sense of desperation and hopelessness under the slave’s calm exterior aspiring for freedom.

The circumstances of the slaves were so different in different parts of the country that it is impossible to make a common assessment about the actual life. Those slaves, who lived in the cities and towns led a comparatively freer and more comfortable life. On the plantations also, there were the elite group, who comprised the domestic servants, like cook, housemaid, the mammy (a sort of house wife and nurse), the laundress, the butler and coachmen. This group had personal contact with the master and mistress, were generally given better food and clothes and were expected to have better manners. The field slave on the other hand, had to work harder, depending on the staple in which he worked. It was easier to work in tobacco or hemp than in cotton and in cotton than in rice or sugar. The slaves dreaded being sold to a sugar plantation, where the work was very heavy and long. They had to labour hard for sixteen to eighteen hours in swampy lands.

The attitude of the master whether kind, indifferent or hostile also influenced the slave’s life a lot. There were masters of a sadistic bent, who tortured and terrorised their slaves. Masters who were kind and treated the slaves well were not uncommon. Generally they tried to subdue their slaves through all means possible, through harsh physical punishments, through religious indoctrination and through enforcement of laws. Catechisms were provided for slaves, teaching them that, the masters ruled on behalf of God. Some masters allowed their slaves to conduct their own religious services, provided a white person was present as the law required. Out of the all-slave
church came the Negro-spiritual songs. It is remarkable that the slaves found in these songs, a way of expressing their resentment and sorrows, which they could not articulate otherwise. They served as a kind of secret password among the slaves.

The Colonies gave statutory recognition to slavery one after another. Connecticut in 1650, Virginia in 1661, Maryland in 1663, New York and New Jersey in 1664, South Carolina in 1682 and Rhode Island and Pennsylvania in 1700. Each state had its own Black codes. Generally, a slave could not testify against Whites and his acts, as attempted acts, were severally punished. A slave was a piece of property and had no rights as a person. Because, he was a slave, legal marriage did not exist for him. Husbands and wives and children faced the “omnipresent threat of forced separation,”\(^\text{15}\) by the sale of one or some of them. Extra-legal sanctions for the Black people were even more severe. They were completely at the whim of their masters. Slave women were often subjected to rape and were forced to have as many children as they could. Mothers were sometimes denied the right to nurse their own children. These specific facts are elaborated by Jacqueline Jones in her book, *Labour of Love, Labour of Sorrow*. The inhuman treatment of the slaves was so organized that it would completely subdue and dehumanize them.

Thus began the story of the oppressive racial discrimination in America. The Afro-American was enslaved, dehumanized, outlawed and all opportunities for a decent livelihood were taken away. Brutality, lynching, rape and cruel torture became common, which form an important part of the novels of writers like Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. The Black men and women realized very early that as far as the white people were concerned they had no identity as human beings. They were merely beasts of

burden, toiling continuously for their masters. The daily frustration, trauma, despair, hatred, fear, and desire for revenge mingled with their deep-rooted desire to be accepted and recognised for their true worth by the white people.

5. First of the Struggles

It must not be supposed that the Black masses bore their enslavement passively. From the very day they were captured on the African soil, through their journey on the slave ships and on the auction block as they were sold, they tried to revolt. But, these revolts were put down very easily. The white masters were very cruel to those who revolted. "As early as 1663, there was a serious slave conspiracy in the Gloucester country, which was betrayed by an indentured servant."\(^{16}\) Those suspected of having taken part in revolts were executed either by whipping to death, burning alive or cutting to pieces in public, so as to strike terror in the hearts of all would be conspirators. "A black woman was burned alive in the slave revolt at Newton, Long Island in New York."\(^{17}\)

It is one of the paradoxes of American history that while they themselves were struggling for freedom from England, the Americans refused to consider that the Black people had as much a right to it as themselves. They denied to the Blacks "all of the elementary rights that the founders of the nation insisted were the birthright of every human being."\(^{18}\) But, the white people's fight for an independent America stimulated the Blacks further and they began to view themselves as deprived and dishonoured inhabitants.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.
Proceeding from this newly found awareness about their rights as human beings and as citizens, they adopted new methods for demanding their rights. They organized themselves, held meetings, tried to build mass pressure, some even filed cases in courts against slavery. Many Blacks joined the American struggle for Independence. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote in her introduction to William C. Nell's *Coloured Patriots of the American Revolution* about the Black patriots who joined the American revolution that “it must be noted that they served a nation, which did not acknowledge them as citizens and equals and in whose interests and prosperity they had less at stake.”\(^\text{19}\) She observes that, it was not for their land that they fought, but for a country which enslaved and oppressed them. “Bravery under such circumstances” she says, “had a peculiar beauty and merit.”\(^\text{20}\) In 1768, when the British troops reached Boston to overthrow the Americans, they were repulsed by Black and white patriots. Many historians consider Crispus Attucks, a Black, who was one of the five persons killed in the Boston Massacre in 1770 as the first martyr of the American Revolution. It was at about the same time that pioneer Black churches started to be established. As Charles H. Wesley has pointed out, the rise of the Black Church during the birthing time of the nation, was an early assertion of “organized independence and self expression.”\(^\text{21}\) in the total life of revolutionary Black America. Baptist churches were organized in the 1773-76 period in Virginia and Georgia.

General Washington at first issued an order, forbidding recruitment officers to enlist Black men in the Army. But, when Lord Dunmore, deposed Governor of Virginia, promised freedom to all male slaves who joined the


\(^{20}\) Ibid.

British Army. General Washington was forced to withdraw his order. The promise of freedom was a factor, which drew a ready response from the Black men. Even though, the Black soldiers were looked down upon and laughed at, they served in integrated units. Many of the soldiers proved to be brave and strong and won the respect of the British and some of the white American Soldiers. The Black soldiers played a critical role in the battle of Rhode Island, Savannah, Mammouth and Fort Griswold.

While the Black and white soldiers fought British soldiers at Lexington and Concord, the first abolitionist society in the United States was being organized in Philadelphia in 1775. By the end of the war "some five thousand Blacks, slaves and freemen had shouldered arms in defense of American liberty." The American Declaration of Independence was adopted in 1776. Soon after the American Revolution, many of the colonies in the North took steps to abolish slavery. In 1783, slavery was abolished in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Pennsylvania passed a gradual emancipation law in 1780, Connecticut and Rhode Island banned slavery in 1784, New York started the process in 1759 and New Jersey abolished it in 1804.

The Black people in the North of America counted themselves lucky to be outside the cotton kingdom, but they had to face bitter competition from the white immigrants to get jobs. White people would not take on a coloured person, unless as a last resort and even then they were to do the most menial, hazardous and dirty jobs. Like their counterparts in the South the Blacks in the North also faced legal disadvantages. They could not testify against the Whites. Most of the States would not permit them to vote and some prohibited the entry of Blacks unless they could guarantee good conduct, by producing a bond. Throughout the (supposed) free states the Blacks faced

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discrimination in public places and in public transport. Only Whites were admitted to the theatres and concert halls. In spite of their own harsh conditions these Black men and women assisted the slaves in the South in all ways they could. They encouraged them, aided them to escape and raised money to buy them off their masters. Since they were not subjected to constant surveillance, they were free to form mutual aid societies to help one another.

In February, 1793 the Congress enacted the first Fugitive Slave Law. It became a criminal offence to harbour a fugitive slave or prevent his arrest. In 1800, the Congress received the first anti-slavery petition from the American Blacks. Absalom Jones explained how Black men, who had been made free according to the laws were again seized, fettered and transported to Georgia and sold back to slavery. The Fugitive Bill “allowed wanton barbarities to be executed on the Black men, who were hunted by armed men and big dogs”\textsuperscript{23} and cruelly shot or brought back to masters, who had no just claim on them. That same summer, a twenty-four-year old Gabriel, who tried to organize five thousand soldiers, to revolt for their freedom was caught and sent to the gallows with thirty five of his supporters.

The Congress passed a law, prohibiting the importation of slaves into American territory in 1808. Meanwhile, U.S troops were used to suppress the rebellion of the slaves in Louisiana. Attempts were made throughout America to persuade the Black people to leave America. In 1830, Blacks in Portsmouth, Ohio were forcibly deported by order of city officials. The first national meeting of the Blacks in which thirty eight delegates from the States convened at Philadelphia, protested against such forced deportation.

The Black people’s African inheritance was taken away, thereby

\textsuperscript{23} Sidney Kaplan C., \textit{The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution 1770 - 1800}, op. cit., p. 239
breaking their connection with Africa. Yet, they would not be allowed to become citizens of America. They looked upon America as their native land and refused to be exiled from it. The famous Nat Turner Rebellion, which resulted in some sixty Whites being killed and Nat Turner being caught and hanged, only strengthened their determination further. Anti-slavery societies were started, schools were opened, Black newspapers and magazines were printed. The white citizens pulled down schools, destroyed printing presses and even white people were arrested for supporting Blacks. The capture of George Latimer in Boston created the first of the fugitive slave cases, which embittered the north and the south of America. Boston abolitionists raised money to purchase Latimer from his slave holder.

Phyllis Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon were the first Black poets, who sang in print during the revolution. Even though not directly of freedom, they spoke as black poets and they affirmed their belief that God would free the Negroes eventually. Voltaire who never thought highly of negroes wrote to a friend that, "Fontanelle was wrong to say there never would be Negro poets; there is one right now, a Negress, who writes excellent verse in English."24

There were astronomers, poets, like Phyllis Wheatley and mathematicians, who earned international fame and began to disprove the widespread belief about the Black man's inherent inferiority. Women like Harriet Tubman not only escaped from slavery by her quick wits and courage, but were successful in freeing others. She returned to the South nineteen times and brought out three hundred slaves. Perhaps, it should be mentioned that in 1848, the first women’s Right Convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York, and men like Frederick Douglas, prominent editor and writer, played an important role in it. Half a century after the Declaration of

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Independence on the 4th of July his question was "Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice embodied in the Declaration extended to us?"\(^{25}\)

6. The Revolution and After

Fate itself seemed to favour the slave owners. In the eighteen thirties, political complications in Europe caused millions of poor white immigrants to take refuge in America. These Europeans, especially the Irishmen, were ready to take up any job at any depressed wage. Thus year after year, the Blacks were forced out of all jobs they had been doing so far and replaced by white foreigners. The U.S. Supreme Court decision in the case of Dred Scot in 1857 which said that Blacks had no rights in America and that no Black could be a citizen of America, made it clear that slavery was back again and was going to stay.

It was a period of deep depression. "The Blacks were saved from total despair by the combined influence of their family, music and religion. Their entertainment, their diet, their sense of family, justice and self, all have dimensions well beyond the slave system."\(^{26}\) All these were oriented towards endurance and hope. They were able to create unique mating and marriage patterns even under the vilest system of slave breeding and polygamy sanctioned by the white masters. "The community of slaves was a communal entity characterized by a collective orientation stemming partly from the African past and partly from the exigencies of the situation."\(^{27}\)

\(^{25}\) Ibid., p 240
\(^{27}\) Lerone Bennett Jr., ed., op. cit., p 96.
The slight spark of hope which arose in the family was fanned by the community and kept alive in their rhythmic and passionate music. Sprung from the African forests, these songs, the blues and spirituals were "adapted, changed and intensified by the tragic soul-life of the slave, until under the stress of law and whip, it became the one true expression of a people’s sorrow, despair and hope "28. Their sorrows and tensions had a sort of cathartic release by means of the songs which were meant to be sung in groups. The communal and familial bonds got strengthened, because of the constant threat of the white master, depriving them of all rights.

The preacher was a unique personality, developed by the needs of the Black religion. He was a reader, a politician, an orator, an intriguer and an idealist. They believed him, and the frenzy or shouting, when the spirit of the Lord passed by, seizing the devotee making him mad with supernatural joy was proof of his firm hold over the people. Out of such group consciousness, arose leaders like Walker, Malcom X, W.E.B. Du Bois and Martin Luther King, who went out into the streets and goaded the people to force America to make true the words of the Declaration that all men were created equal and were equal before the law. In spite of these oppressions, the Blacks got themselves consolidated under the leaders, who made a mark on the fragile sands of the Black social situation.

7. The Black Reconstruction

When the civil war broke out between the North and South of America, the Lincoln administration at first rejected black volunteers, who wanted to join the war. The confederacy (the pro-slavery South) were the first to recognize that Blacks were major factors in the war. Large numbers of slaves

worked in mines to repair railroads and build fortifications; thus releasing a large number of Whites for direct war service. The secretary of the U.S. Navy authorized enlistment of slaves in 1861 and in 1862, and the Congress authorized the President to accept Blacks for military service. In the same year President Lincoln recommended gradual emancipation of slaves. The union officers were also forbidden to aid in the capture and return of fugitives slaves.

While the North recruited the first Black regiment, 54 Massachusetts volunteers, the confederate Congress branded Black troops and their officers criminals and condemned captured Black soldiers to death or slavery. President Lincoln retorted by issuing an “eye-for-eye” order, warning the confederacy that the Union army would shoot a rebel prisoner for every Black prisoner shot. The Congress also passed a bill, equalising pay, arms, equipment and medical services of Black troops. In 1863, President Lincoln, signed the Emancipation Proclamation which freed the slaves in rebel states with the exception of a few parishes and counties.

General William T. Sherman issued a field order according to which slaves were to be provided with forty acres of tillable ground on the confiscated and abandoned lands of confederate rebels. The Blacks were jubilant and they travelled about trying to rejoin their families, broken by slavery before settling down in their farms. However, the national executives faltered and the programmes of land redistribution were cancelled. Very few individuals were able to buy land with the savings put together during the war, but most did it by renting farms for a share of the anticipated crop. The great majority of the planters would have preferred to keep their estates intact but the freedmen would not have it that way. They preferred to rent their forty acres for a share of the crop, to borrow as it were their mules and to live upon their own small farms tenanted if necessary rather than owned and to do so even if it was less economic than the plantation system.
In the three vital areas, in their families, on their farms and in their churches, Blacks moved physically away from the Whites. The Black churches although they withdrew from the Whites practised the same ritual and theology as the Whites. Of course they were often more emotional, spontaneous and less philosophical than the white Church. The Black family followed the pattern of the Victorian family. Fathers were breadwinners and mothers stayed at home and reared the children. The Black men tried to keep their women out of the fields whenever they could. They tried to pattern their family structure, according to the Whites. Thus, the “acceptance of the cultural standards of the White majority meant denial of selfhood for the Black minority.” 29 The Process of Black reconstruction got impeded because of the Blacks aping the Whites. In spite of the white influence the Blacks retained their primal human qualities, carried over from their African past.

The sharecropper system, the Blacks soon realized was only another form of slavery. In theory, the share-cropper and the planter split the proceeds of the crops. Since it was the planter who kept the books, it never, worked that way. The Blacks soon found themselves in perpetual debt even though they worked harder and harder. Thus, the long awaited emancipation proclamation which had made the freed slaves jubilant soon submerged them in sorrow and despair, when they realized that freedom did not automatically lift them from the squalid conditions of misery and poverty.

8. The Racist Upswing

The South quickly set about to create a biracial system based on white supremacy. Black codes known as the “Jim Crow” 30 laws which restricted the

30 Lerone Bennett Jr., op. cit., p.258.
freedom of the slaves in all areas from place of residence to marriage were passed. Bitterness on the part of the defeated South, the almost complete economic destruction of the vast majority of the South population, the awkwardness of Blacks as new citizens were some of the factors that helped the Whites to establish their supremacy again. Ideological confusion of northern liberals and the ready willingness of the federal government to compromise the citizenship status of Blacks for the sake of national unity proved to be a potent combination of political and social factors, which favoured the growth of racism. The free Blacks found themselves as powerless and unfree as they had been during slavery.

For all practical purposes southern Whites united against the advancement of Blacks in all areas of life. Anti-Black laws were passed by state legislatures and enforced by the police and courts without any regard to the question of constitutionality. A South Carolina law, for instance, put strict limits on the relations between Black and White factory workers and had the general effect of barring Blacks from the new textile industry.31 They forbade freed men to follow any occupation except farming and menial service.

The ultimate weapon against the Blacks was violence. Men and boys were authorized to whip and discipline Blacks. Organized violence was executed by posses and police forces. Communal violence was executed by men, women and children, who gathered in tens of thousands to view and execute lynch law, obviously an inhuman and savage act. Ida B. Wells, who issued authoritative contemporary reports on the practice said “approximately ten thousand people were lynched in America between 1878 and 1898.”32

31 Joel Williamson, op. cit., p. 57.
32 Ibid.
“Separation and alienation from the white world loosened the threads of Black life for a generation or more.”[^33] Each individual Black person had to undergo a measure of “dis-orientation or anarchy, chaos and loneliness.”[^34] When the Black self became nobody’s “negro” they were out of place and out of law. They were often lynched, murdered quietly or slaughtered in riots. Many were forced to slow death in the chains of convict labour. “Walled away from the dominant white society, denied the order afforded by living in that relatively stable universe and missing the protection of a Blacks’ enclove, some Black people were left to isolation, to self-denigration and ultimately to self hatred.”[^35] The Blacks destroyed one another or themselves “in a churning, nearly formless Black rage.”[^36]

Individual Black youth dissatisfied with the society, Whites and Blacks, took to a roaming, reckless and often violent ways of life. Added to this was the bitter fact that it was easier for women to find work in the cities as maids and domestic helpers. This was one of the main reasons for the system of Black matriarchy, which developed later. Humiliation at the hands of the dominant white culture in the reconstruction decades laid a heavy hand on the psyche of all Blacks, even those who were relatively well off. They became suspicious not only of Whites, but also of other Blacks. Black leaders grew jealous of each other and failed to unite the Blacks in a project for the welfare of the Black people as a whole.

By the end of the nineteenth century “one out of ten Afro-Americans lived in the South and eighty percent of these resided in rural areas, primarily in the formerly slave cotton Belt.”[^37] These Blacks occupied the very lowest

[^33]: Ibid., p.58.
[^34]: Ibid.
[^35]: Ibid.
[^36]: Ibid.
[^37]: Jacqueline Jones. op. cit., p.80.
position in the social hierarchy that ranged from planters at the top, the small landowners in the middle, the various states of tenancy at the bottom. The Blacks were mostly share croppers or contract labourers, who did not even own their equipment.

9. The Great Migration

Ultimately, the same measures that were used to subordinate Black farmers forced them to migrate to another city or town at first and after 1916 to a Northern city. "A desire to improve oneself economically by going North was, of course, a chief motive for migration."\textsuperscript{38} Many had heard about specific job opportunities and many had friends, who had become well to do in the North, but just as important was the general myth of Northern prosperity.

The Great Migration, which by 1920, was an immense movement of large number of men, women and children to the North led to further despair and disillusionment. The 13\textsuperscript{th} constitutional amendment on the abolition of slavery and the 14\textsuperscript{th} amendment on the extension of civil rights had raised hopes of an integrated society in which there would be equality and happiness for all. But, the North failed to provide a social environment much different from the South.

The denial of civil rights and the pattern of white violence were equally wide spread in the North. "Among the most infamous were Illinois lynching that occurred in 1908, near Abraham Lincoln’s home."\textsuperscript{39} To protest against such atrocities, some progressive Black men including W.E.B.Du Bois, Monroe

\textsuperscript{38} Gunnar Myrdal, \textit{An American Dilemma} (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944), p.593.

Trotter and Sulton Griggs, organized in 1905 the Niagara Movement. Some of them joined later with some white liberals to found the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People) in 1910 and the Urban League in 1911. Their purpose was to protect the life and rights of Black citizens.

The NAACP lobbied vigorously for a federal anti-lynching law, but in vain. In the election of 1912, Woodrow Wilson had promised the Blacks “absolute fair dealing, for everything by which I (he) could assist in advancing the interest of their race in the United States.”

The death of Booker T. Washington, who advocates submission to segregation and the failure of Wilson’s peace gestures towards Germany marked the end of America’s strained policy of neutrality towards Blacks and Germans alike. In 1917, the U.S joined France in her war against Germany. Du Bois and other Black leaders called out to all Blacks to join the crusade to make the world safe for democracy. But it was in segregated regiments that the Black soldiers fought.

During this time many of the Blacks tried to dissociate themselves as much as possible from their own race. They used cream and lotions which were supposed to make them whiter and tried to straighten their hair and so on. They tried to make enough money to move into fashionable white suburbs. Some unconsciously tried to live up to the image, the white men had given them of being shiftless, lazy, over-emotional, sexually promiscuous, dishonest or lawless. By the 1930s, many prominent Black personalities, like Langston Hughes, began to speak of Marxist-Communist radicalism as the only answer to their problems, while others evolved the Black Conservatism.

Following the collapse of the reconstruction, the NAACP decided that

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the only long-range hope for the upliftment of the Blacks lay in education. It invested a great deal of its time and funds for widening educational opportunities by court action. “From 1920 to 1930 despite struggling backwardness of black public school education in the South, black student enrolment in college had risen from approximately 2,132 in 1917 to 13,580 in 1927.”\textsuperscript{41} Parents began to realize that, Jim Crow education was not preparing their children for the opportunities of the time. Moreover, segregation based solely on race was affecting the mental development of the children, creating in them a sense of inferiority. It began to be widely held that, the doctrine of “separate but equal” had no place in education and that it was inherently unequal. The University of Maryland in 1935, had capitulated to desegregation at the graduate school level without taking the case to the Supreme Court. Three years later, the University of Missouri was instructed to take on a qualified Black student. In a conference of the NAACP attorneys in New York in 1951, it was resolved “to insist on non segregation in American public education from top to bottom from law school to kindergarten.”\textsuperscript{42} In 1955, the Supreme Court issued an order calling for a prompt and reasonable start towards full compliance of desegregation in education. Despite opposition from the Deep South, the local boards in the North and the leader states continued to obey. In the South also the Blacks began to press for the integration of schools.

10. \textit{The Post - War Situation}

As early as 1933, lynching was a distinct statutory offence in Alabama, Virginia and North Carolina. Alabama, Tennessee and South Carolina provided


for the removal from office of lawmen who failed to prevent lynching. But none of these laws were ever used especially in cases of Blacks. By the late 1930s, a growing number of responsible southerners began to feel that the lynching of Blacks was to be stopped.

When confronted with extra legal violence against Blacks, late nineteenth century Presidents also generally did nothing against it, emphasizing the limitations of federal power and need for sectional harmony. The Justice Department also remained extremely reluctant to move against racial violence in the south. Only during World War II, did the attitude of the federal government begin to change. In July 1942, "bothered by the use enemy propagandist’s were making of the mob murder of a Black prisoner in Sikeston, Missouri, as well as by the growing militancy of American Blacks and prompted by a recent lynching in Texarkana, President Roosevelt instructed the Justice Department to investigate all such killings of Negroes automatically to determine whether there was any basis for asserting Federal jurisdiction."43 The Government did succeed in bringing a few cases to trial but failed to get indictments. Perhaps, because success seemed so rare, Justice Department, seemed to continue to deal with most civil rights violations by urging state officials to take action under their own state law.

In the Second World War, a larger number of Black Americans participated. And the fact that they were no longer forced to work in segregated units, increased their self-confidence. Moreover, during the 1930s and 1940s the economic conditions of the Black had improved considerably. The sporting and musical abilities of the Blacks had received universal acclaim. Many of them began to assert their identity more emphatically by moving away from everything connected with Whites. Some tried to renew

ties with Africa and some following Malcolm X converted into Muslims. As the war shut off the flow of white immigrants into America, more and more Black men began to assume responsibilities in government, business, labour, education and social services.

11. Towards Egalitarianism

As the Black men continued to migrate to the North, the Southern Blacks began to shift to the cities. The urban concentration, especially in the North of America, gave the Blacks, political power for the first time, since reconstruction. The NAACP concentrated not only on widening industrial opportunities for the Black people, but on crusading against lynching, on the franchise, on the elimination of poll tax and on the removal of all sorts of segregation and discrimination.

It was A. Philip Randolph with his idea of organizing a protest march of ten thousand Negroes to Washington, who gave impetus to the Blacks and changed the NAACP from a legal rights agency to a mass membership protest organisation. The Black press came out with Randolph's flaming attack on the Wilson administration and the war against Marcus Garvey who advocated the return of Blacks to Africa. In 1936, Randolph participated in funding the national Negro Congress, and attempted to join all existing Negro trade unions, religious and civic bodies and became its President. When more and more Black men began to respond to the call to all "Negro Americans to march on Washington for jobs and equal participation in National Defense," President Roosevelt called a meeting of the leaders. When all efforts at negotiations failed, the President issued Executive Order 8802 banning discrimination in defense and in Government employment.

44 Thomas R. Brooks, op. cit., p. 27.
The effect of Jim Crow was still pursuing the Blacks as they moved into the city taking new jobs. Recreational facilities, public places and restaurants were often restricted to them. Impressed by Philip Randoloph's civil rights strategies, based on Gandhian principles of non-violence, a group of young pacifists in Chicago formed a committee of Racial Equality, CORE. They worked up a series of projects testing the Illinois’s law against discrimination in public places. In 1942, Bayard Rustin, a firm believer in non-violence, though beaten and arrested for refusing to sit in the Jim crow section at the back seat of the bus, was able to make a positive impression.

One of the persons influenced by Rustin’s talks on non-violence, was Martin Luther King Jr. The two strategies of Gandhi, that of mass action and of non-violence, civil disobedience- would come together and play a pivotal role in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. By integrating restaurants, barber shops, roller skating clubs and swimming pools in northern and border cities, CORE contributed significantly in halting Jim Crow rules in the North. But, until the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-56, CORE was not able to gain much success in the south.

Montgomery was one of the cities in the South, where race relations were described as good in the sense that the Black people did not challenge their subordinate position. Most of them had to travel by bus everyday which meant they had to submit to the indignity of Jim Crow Service. The front seats were reserved for the Whites and the Blacks had to board the bus at the back door. Often they were rudely asked to vacate their seat in the mid bus unreserved section. It was against this segregation that Martin Luther King, Rustin and Randolph conducted a boycott based on “non violent resistance, non-co-operation and passive resistance.”

45 Thomas R Brooks, op. cit., p. 112
intimidation, arrests and torture, the Blacks held on firmly to their principles. Finally, the United States Supreme Court affirmed that segregation on buses was unconstitutional and Martin Luther King and his followers boarded the first integrated bus in Montgomery’s history, the event appearing on the television for all to see. All these statutory provisions for accommodating Black American interests can be considered a major step forward, towards the achievement of a better self image on the part of the Afro-American for the simple reason that there is a semblance of equality of opportunity resulting from this. It also works as a morale boosting for large numbers of Blacks.

A wave of non-violent and direct action protest-sit-ins, pickets and marches against segregation at lunch counters, public parks, theatres, churches, inter-state transportation, museums, art galleries and so on spread over a hundred cities in the South and border states. Thousands supported these movements by letters to the editor, financial contributions and expressions of moral support. The Federal Government however continued to be extremely reluctant to order a general Federal Civil Rights Constitution because the President dared not antagonize the south.

In 1961, Martin Luther King declared “If we in the south can win the right to vote it will place in our hands more than an abstract right. It will give us the concrete tool with which we ourselves can correct injustice.” In spite of the 15th constitutional amendment on the right of suffrage of Black citizens, in most of the southern states the Black citizens were prevented either “by outright discrimination or by fear of physical violence or economic reprisal from exercising the right to vote.” In 1959, land owners had evicted nearly a thousand Blacks who had registered to vote and CORE began a national campaign for food and relief. By 1961, the Kennedy justice Department had

46 Ibid., p.170
47 Ibid., p.171
filed thirty seven suits regarding voter rights, but they yet hesitated to recognize the need for a greatly strengthened voting rights act.

By 1963, the Black masses were no longer prepared to wait for anybody, for elections, for legislation or even for their own leaders. Defiant men and women took to the streets to articulate their grievances and the scenes often erupted in violence. According to a Justice Department count, there were at least 758 demonstrations in 186 cities across the south during this period. In the same year the famous march on Washington of some 210,000 Black men for jobs and freedom took place. It was in front of the Lincoln Memorial that Martin Luther King made his memorable speech which began “I have a dream” and with dramatic intensity spoke of the unresolved issue of human rights.

The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Right Act of 1965 created a crisis for the government. Activity in the North became frenetic, as protesters lay down before construction site bulldozers, closed down schools, ran strikes and demanded an immediate working plan on housing, schools, employment and police brutality. Leaders competed with each other in raising demands and creating sensational scenes for the television.

The Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1966 which prohibited threat of injury to persons engaged in the exercise of their constitutional rights, assured the selection of state federal juries without regard to race and banned racial and religious discrimination in the sale, rental and financing, of roughly 80 per cent of all housing in the United States. By these methods the judicial fabric got strengthened to tackle all legal disputes regarding racism. This is virtually the victory of the first battle on behalf of millions of Afro-Americans.
12. The Struggle Goes on

By the Mid 1960s, the per-capita income of the Blacks had risen higher and this led to further demands for more and for the removal of the remaining discrepancies. When Martin Luther King was shot to death, a wave of violence broke out through a hundred towns and cities and federal troops had to be called in. "With King gone, the rhetoric of black spokesmen became increasingly militant and there continued to be signs that black alienation from white society was spreading and deepening."\(^{48}\)

During the early nineteen seventies the Black leaders pointed out that gains won by non-violent protests and civil rights legislation did not solve the basic issues of job discrimination, housing, residential segregation and inadequate education. The spreading discontent and unrest, became more and more violent. "The more the crime in the Streets and student unrest, the greater mobilization of conservative forces, particularly the police."\(^{49}\) This extreme degree of tension subsided some what, with the arrival of new issues like the Vietnam War and inflation but the undercurrents were still strong.

After oscillating between the extremes of Black nationalism and various views and approaches to integration the Black Americans moved from protest to politics. The shift from exerting moral power— appealing to the American nation by speaking of their painful dilemma, to exerting political power— trying to correct the injustice through the power of the vote was in itself the basis for a broader movement of social change. As Andrew Greeley has argued, most militant action by Blacks, violent or peaceful has been


“counter productive while on the contrary, the election of Black mayors in several American cities with the help of white voters has established that a broad political consensus is not by any means impossible.”

More and more Blacks are participating in electoral politics and winning political office in increasing numbers. But, “the lack of political and economic resources among Blacks, the constraints of past discrimination, institutional racism and the slow pace of change brought about through the electoral process” has some what undermined the faith that America’s electoral representation system can be made to work for Black Americans.

Recently, there has been the institution of both formal and informal quota system in terms of entrance into college and professional schools, the teaching profession, labour unions and office holding in professional and political organizations. The quota system is expected to give “the minority a foot in the door to equal participation and a possibility of a degree of integration,” however small it may be. Although the biased officials impeded the success of such programmes, there continues even today many federal agencies and programmes devoted to the welfare of Black Americans. Integration is a long-range interest, if not an actual impossibility to most Blacks who want to achieve self-respect, higher quality facilities and better opportunities within a short time; they desire equality now rather than the promise of integration later.

52 Hubert M. Blalock, op. cit., p.41.
Ever since the second World War, when the world opinion has been focussed on the American racial prejudice, the formation of new independent African nations after 1957 and the development of an educated Black elite there has been an increasing sense of group identification among the Blacks. This has exerted great influence in strengthening their drive toward equality. In the process during which Blacks went through changes in self conception the white Americans also went through changes in their conception of Blacks. The Image of the Black man is being redefined through the radio, the theatre and the television. He no longer appears in advertisements as a grotesque, ape-like creature but is given roles which remove the association of a dark complexion and negroid features with an inferior social status. Much attention and even admiration is showered on the successful Black sportsman, musician, actor or politician in the mass media.

Considering the fact that they began with nothing, but humiliations, and fought against so many, the Afro-Americans have come a long way. Yet they have a longer way to go. As Harold Cruse has said they understand that “in the foreseeable future Black Americans, with or without civil rights reinforcement, must strive to survive economically within the rules of the game of free-enterprise, free market American capitalism.” What ever the political ideology, Democratic, Republican or Liberal, the dominant white American economic ideology will neither foster nor sanction any other form of national economic organisation.

Regardless of new technologies and modes of pacification and oppression, the Black Americans can be counted on to continue the long march for freedom, equality and justice. In the final analysis we can see that under all oppressive circumstances, even in conditions of slavery, the Black people were

always able to find new resources within themselves as they worked, endured and prayed. The history of the Black Americans is, thus, one of the greatest triumphs of the human spirit in all times.

Hence it becomes evident that like oppressed people everywhere, the self-perception of the Blacks can be delineated clearly only against the background of their particular history. To understand the dominating forces at work in the social milieu of the Blacks, a knowledge of their history of oppression becomes an absolute necessity. All the four writers taken up for study undertake the great task of redefining the definitions concerning the Afro-American, creating new myths, symbols and images while dealing with their history, so that the readers can re-envision the past and thus the future. While Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin do not go deeply into African history as such, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker exalt such African customs as ancestor worship, African religion, Philosophy and the supernatural. They resort to techniques and devices identified with both African and western experience like the oral narrative, the romance, and the protagonists mythological journeys to the rural homes of their ancestors.

Moreover it is true that historical factors as they appear in the fiction of all these four writers, are rather accurate at least in as much they encapsulate the realities of the various periods of slavery, post-reconstruction and decades of the eighties and nineties. "Unless one explores and understands past history Ellison and Baldwin maintain, he or she can never become part of the historical process."54 Viewed from this perspective, the exploration of the Black self concept becomes all the more fundamental, clear and complete.