Chapter VI
VI. Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, all the four belong to the same ethnic group – the group of African-Americans – and they all have felt the ill-effects of oppression, though the former two are born about three decades earlier than the latter two. Richard Wright may be considered as one of the earliest forces to have touched the conscience of the Americans on oppression and the resultant inequality and injustice heaped on the African-Americans. It is obvious that writers like Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker have been influenced to a considerable extent by Richard Wright. Each of these four African-American writers, highlights poignantly the oppressor-oppressed relationship in his/her writings. Toni Morrison and Alice Walker show greater concern for the plight of the oppressed African-American women. This oppressor-oppressed relationship has been observed and exposed by these writers, themselves being an integral part of the life and environment created by such a relationship. Their reaction may be called the expression of their anger – their righteous indignation – against the injustice, inequality, oppression and a certain psychological blindness of the society to see such oppression. Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, being women, are able to understand the plight of African-American women in a more sympathetic way. They are equally conscious of how these hapless African-American women are being abused right from their childhood. Inhuman acts such as sexual violence and the physiological and psychological effects caused by unwanted pregnancy and the resultant trauma caused
by any one or a combination of these experiences on the oppressed women also find eloquent expression in these writers. These writers have suggested the ways also for ending this violence and oppression by indicating that the possible solution must come from within, by realising their role and responsibility. Alice Walker suggests indirectly in her *Meridian*, that Gandhian principles of Non-violence and Noncooperation may deliver the goods, in their attainment of equality and justice, the pinnacle of their Civil Rights Movement. The readers are made to realise that it is essential that these two classes – the oppressors and the oppressed, must cease to be – if the oppressor-oppressed relationship is to disappear for ever. These writers have also established beyond doubt that the oppressor-oppressed relationship is unnatural and man-made and hence the damage done by man to his fellow men and women must be undone by a possible and positive attitudinal change.

A study of the novels of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker shows that these writers highlight the shattered American Dream and the resultant frustration and anger. The frustration is caused by the vast gulf of difference between the ideal dream and the actual reality. The colony founded on the principles of Liberty, Equality and Freedom for all the settlers in the new world, has turned into one where these principles have remained inapplicable for the African-Americans. These writers, themselves being African-Americans – belonging to a major segment of the American citizens – forcibly bring one’s attention to the fact that over the years the grip of the powers and forces have been responsible for the evil of oppression,
inequality and injustice. The words of Michel True become very relevant and highly significant in this context:

A writer’s political persuasion – right, left, or center, capitalistic, or socialistic – is often less important, however, than his or her responses to specific issues... just as labels seldom tell us much about an artist’s preoccupations in a particular work or at a particular point in his or her life. More relevant in this history are an essayist’s manner of addressing injustices in American culture, a novelist’s insights into how personal or social conflicts are resolved, or a poet’s reflections on how someone negotiates his or her way across a hostile political landscape. (xv-xxiii)

Each of these writers has his/her own methodology, uniqueness and particular style of looking at the problems and each of these writers do establish a separate focus. Their writings focus one’s attention to the play between the Dream and the Reality, exhorting the oppressed to stand up and fight for justice and equality. They reveal in no uncertain terms that the realisation of their dream will not be possible unless they realise their capability and empower themselves. Despite the divergence in their methodology, there is an amazing confluence of ideas where they all agree that oppression, indignity, inequality and brutality have all to be wiped out. They also have a vision that besides the political will, the change has to come from within. The Declaration of Emancipation by Abraham Lincoln, and the Great Dream Martin
Luther King. Jr. had where he could see the black and white children playing as equals will be realised by this great change that has to come from within.

**VI. 1. The oppressor-oppressed relationship: Injustice and Inequality:**

The oppressive environment plays a significantly stifling role in creating inequality leading to injustice. Though slavery has been abolished, the society does not recognise the African-Americans and any recognition extended to the African-American is based on negative thinking. The life of segregation, the ghetto life exists for the African-American. Bigger Thomas is a product of such ghetto life infested with rats and his failure to come to terms with the white is the result of his frustration. His accidental murder of a white girl, closes all the possibilities of his life once and for all. The moment he has murdered a white girl, he is doomed and his fate is sealed. *Lawd Today* reveals the frustration of an African-American postal worker, destined to live a life of unsound foundations, destined to ill-treat his wife and destined to find his momentary peace only in his drunkenness. The protagonist Cross Damon in *The Outsider*, becomes a murderer and criminal and for him the horror is his feeling of innocence: “... in my heart... I’m ... I felt... I’m *innocent* .... That’s what made the horror...”

If Cross Damon is made the outsider, then the protagonist is made invisible in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. The oppressive environment and the injustice done to him make him run from pillar to post. Even when he is involved in the core of an explosive accident, his white employers are more keen only on keeping themselves
free of any responsibility. Invisible Man becomes another victim of the oppressive environment.

Toni Morrison’s Pecola Breedlove is again a victim of the oppressive environment. Like many other African-American female children, Pecola is forced to develop a negative zero-image. Her incestuous rape and her loss of mental equilibrium can all be attributed to the oppressive environment forced on her. Morrison’s Sula is an extension of Pecola Breedlove, but determined to fight the forces of her oppressive environment.

Alice Walker reveals the negative impacts of an oppressive environment on the lives of Grange Copeland, Brownfield and their women. Meridian and Celie both are victims of such an environment.

VI. 2. The Blindness caused by the oppressor-oppressed relationship:

The oppressor-oppressed relationship causes a sort of blindness, making people either physiologically or psychologically blind to the passions, yearnings, sufferings and disappointments of their fellow men and women. Whereas Mrs. Dalton is physiologically blind, others like Mr. Dalton, Miss Dalton and most others in Native Son are psychologically blind to the African-Americans. The protagonist in Lawd Today is psychologically blind to his own needs and desires and his blindness makes him seek solutions for his problems in blind alleys. Cross Damon reveals his blindness, by trying to create a new identity for himself and trying to become another God, seeking absolute power.
Ellison’s *Invisible Man* may be considered as a work of fiction concentrating on this psychological blindness. The white oppressors are blind to the needs of the African-Americans, even while pretending to be their benefactors. African-Americans like Dr. Bledsoe are blind to everything except their own selfish thirst for survival and power. The organisation of the Brotherhood is once again wilfully blind to the African-American problem and all they want is power and absolute power. *Invisible Man* is blind to his own weaknesses, till such time he jumps into a man-hole and becomes literally invisible as well.

Morrison’s fiction depicts the blindness of people to understand children and women. This psychological blindness causes these victims to withdraw into themselves, resulting in their zero-image. It is this blindness that forces Sula to become rebellious, and it is this psychological blindness acting differently on Son and Jadine that makes them not to see and recognise the individual needs, yearnings and importance of each other.

Walker’s fiction reveals the psychological blindness of men to recognise women. The women are ill-treated to such an extent that some of them are forced to commit suicide, while others are murdered in cold blood. Their blindness forces the women to lose their identity.

**VI. 3. The loss of identity:**

The blindness of the oppressor in turn leads to the problem of the loss of identity of the oppressed. The African-American youth wandering in the streets feel frustrated and rootless. Their individuality and identity is lost in chaos and wilderness.
Bigger Thomas and his companions, Bigger Thomas’ girl friend, his sister, brother and mother all feel uncomfortable and rootless. The total loss of identity of the African-American individual is portrayed by the very title Invisible Man. Pecola Breedlove’s identity is lost in her the zero-image. The society tries its best to erase the self-made identity of Sula. Walker’s men do their best not to allow any freedom to their women and Brownfield forcibly erases the identity of his wife Mem, culminating in his shooting Mem, blowing her head off. Grange feels the loss of identity in the North. The identity and recognition extended to Meridian by her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement is not at all relished by the white oppressors. Thus the loss of identity of the oppressed is one of the ugly by-products of the oppressor-oppressed relationship.

VI. 4. The Realisation: The solution has to come from within.

The oppressive conditions and the effects of oppression lead the oppressed to a realisation that the solution has to be derived from within, this realisation attained through experiences of frustration, anger, violence and death. Most of the protagonists realise that they have been ultimately responsible for their actions and they cannot escape from the after-effects. This sense of owning responsibility leads to further realisation that the ultimate solution has to come from within.

On the eve of his death Bigger gets a feverish “feeling without knowing, seeking without finding?” and realises, “Maybe it ain’t fair to kill, and I reckon I really didn’t want to kill... I didn’t want to kill... But what I killed for, I am!”
Ellison’s Invisible Man has a similar feeling that ultimately he is responsible for whatever has happened to him. He has chosen a life, to state “I am an invisible man.” Grange Copeland accepts the responsibility for his past sins and redeems himself by nurturing and defending his grand daughter. Morrison’s Sula, “realized, or rather she sensed, that there was not going to be any pain. She was not breathing because she didn’t have to … She was dead.”

For most of these protagonists the realisation dawns on the eve of their death. In practical terms, such a belated realisation – however significant and truthful it may be – cannot bring any desired change in their lives. But their experience and realisation paves the way for finding the solution to the problems caused by oppression that the deliverance for the oppressed must come from within and that one form of violence – oppression – can never be erased with other forms of violence.

Michal True’s observation:

One can learn from foreign heroes and heroines, no doubt… but in speaking truth to power, people must choose signs and sayings out of their own history and culture, rather than adopt those belonging to completely different circumstances and traditions. (133) also confirms the truth that the solution to the African-Americans must come from within.

It is equally true to note that the American scene today is not what it used to be a hundred years earlier and one can say that such an attitudinal change has been brought about by the conscientious writings of novelists such as Richard Wright,
Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and many others. The relevance of these writers has to be assessed against this positive, changing scenario. Literature cannot just remain a chronicle of societal changes and cannot remain on an exclusive domain, the faculty being a live and vibrant organism.

It is a good sign that there are positive indications of an attitudinal change in the American mindset. President Clinton acknowledges the fact that bigotry, intolerance and injustice do exist. But he also indicates the hope that values of love and the willingness to accept all as equals, will strengthen the human spirit. His words reverberate with hope in the midst of injustice and hopelessness:

Threats to freedom persist, and human rights are still at risk. In the United States, we have not completely purged ourselves of bigotry and intolerance... Too many women in the world suffer from wide-ranging injustices...

The new born child does not know how to hate. That has to be learned. It is just as easy to nurture the values of love and respect to ensure that all children have the opportunity to allow their innate capabilities to flourish, to give strength to human spirit. (6-7)

The words of Hillary Rodham Clinton are equally powerful and convincing:

We do not believe that violence against women is simply cultural; we believe it is simply criminal. ... if the century has a lesson for us that is redeeming, it is that by extending the circle
of citizenship and human dignity to include everyone – without exception – then we have the basis for new worlds of hope to flourish. (8-13)

VI. 5. The relevance of Peace and Non-Violence:

The principles of Peace and Non-Violence become highly relevant in this context. The burden of a nonviolent, pacifist philosophy in a violent, nonpacifist society remains a cause of anguish for Walker and many others. Royster has suggested that Walker,

... had not assimilated the fundamental percepts of Gandhi’s Satyagraha (3-19), the “soul-force” or “truth-force” which gives one power to end persecution and oppression by inflicting suffering not on “the opponent but on one’s self.” Accustomed to practicing self-denial, Gandhi knew how to withstand this suffering without feeling like a victim or a persecutor, and he became a successful rescuer; Walker lacked Gandhi’s special talents. Gandhi also reminds those who would struggle against oppressive violence that “by using similar means we can get only the same thing that they got.” ... Permitting suffering to be inflicted on oneself is more difficult for many people than inflicting it on others; to withstand, one must practise informed self-denial. (348-370)
The African-Americans do reveal a longing for a Gandhian solution to their problem of racial oppression in America. The Congress of Race Equality – CORE – one of the earliest civil rights organisations, founded in 1943, is specifically committed to “Gandhian principles, vowing to confront racial prejudice in the United States without fear, hatred or violence.” (63-85) states David Cortright, adding, “CORE was perhaps the first organization in the United States to pioneer the application of Gandhian techniques to the American problems of racial segregation.” (63-85) Cortright raises a genuine doubt:

The Gandhian method may not be viable in circumstances of unrelenting terror and brutality. Gandhi himself said that if the choice is between cowardice and violence, between meekly accepting tyranny and resorting to armed resistance, it is better to choose violence. (63-85)

and gets an affirmative and convincing answer by quoting Barbara Deming’s “Revolution and Equilibrium” by stating:

... nonviolent action can be a forceful and effective means of political action, and that the methods of noncooperation pioneered by Gandhi and King were capable of challenging the most powerful and entrenched systems of oppressions. (63-85)

After being assured by Howard Thurman, that African-Americans were ready to receive “the message of nonviolence”, Mahatma Gandhi said “somewhat prophetically” (65) states True, that it “may be through the Negroes that the
unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world”; True mentions that the Mahatma’s prophecy was fulfilled “two decades later, through the Civil Rights movement...” (65).

By their approach of non-violence, the African-Americans “challenge the legitimacy of those in authority and sometimes threaten their power base, their purpose, as Gandhi often said, is to provoke a response” (xv-xxiii) states True, while discussing the effective application of the principle of non-violence to challenge inequality, injustice and oppression.

The discussions have analysed the oppressor-oppressed relationship in African-American fiction pertaining to the select novels of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker and the influence caused by such a relationship and the solution suggested by their works that the deliverance for the oppressed must come from within. The possibility of effectively utilising the Gandhian principles of Peace and Non-Violence, in the war against oppression has also been suggested. The discussions establish the fact even though the oppression exists even today, there is a positive attitudinal change in the American mindset, giving one hope that inequality, injustice and oppression, all will vanish one day, the peaceful end brought about by the means of non-violence.

VI. 6. Avenues for further Studies and Research:

Any research paper attains a sense of fulfilment only when the discussions lead to avenues for further studies and research. The oppressor-oppressed relationship is not just confined to the United States of America. A study of the
oppressor-oppressed relationship in the context of caste conflicts in India, offers a rich and thought provoking field. The frustrations of the oppressed expressed in The Dalit Literature may be a source of highly interesting studies. The reactions of some of the Indian writers – to the problem of oppression – the writers like Mulk Raj Anand, writing in English, and others like Jayakanthan, Sujatha and Balakumaran writing in Tamil and the peculiar problems faced by the oppressed women found in the writings of Kamala Das may prove to be fertile fields of research with pregnant possibilities. One may conclude by saying that the end of this work is not its real end in the sense that the findings of this particular work will be the foundation and beginning for many more projects of research yet to be started. The purpose of this thesis will be fulfilled and amply rewarded, if this thesis and its findings serve as an inspiration to future research scholars urging them to more fruitful ventures.