CHAPTER-II
THE GENESIS OF AFRO-AMERICAN LITERATURE

As a preliminary step towards the outlining of the genesis and evolution of the literature of the blacks in America, a clarification of the various terms designating the American descendants of African peoples is in order. The word “negro” is derogatory and it is deliberately reductive. The Negro has been taught that he is nobody and that blackness is a badge of biological depravity and sign of worthlessness. As an audacious appreciation of their heritage and their “historical determination to define and name themselves, ‘Negro’, first capitalized in 1930, is a socio- economic term that was popular from about 1880 to 1960” Martin Coyle et., Encyclopedia of Literature and criticism: London ;Routledge, 991, 1137).

During the “Black Power” and “Black Arts Movement” of the 1960’s, “the semantics of self-definition made it derigueur amongst the young that the term ‘Negro’ be supplanted by the term ‘black’(Nathan A.Scott,Jr., “Black Literature”, in Harvard Guide to contemporary American writing, ed. Daniel Hoffman, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press,197,305). The terms “African American”, “Afro –American”, and “Black American” were also of the American continent and in developing a sense of their own value. These terms are emblematic of an awakened racial pride, a pride fostered by their African roots and by their American heritage.
As a consequence of prejudice against hyphenated ethnic designations, in some quarters the term “Afro-American” is not much preferred. “Black” as a skin colour conflicts with “black’ as group-name because of the varying colour shades within the group arising out of the miscegenation and mixed blood lines which can neither be denied nor concealed leading to some uncertainties and reluctance in its use. But these two terms are the more common contemporary designations used synonymously and interchangeably. The black American writers up to 1960 called themselves “Negro Literature”. Hence references to these writers, their writings and quotations contain the term “Negro”. Otherwise, for general use in the dissertation the term “black American” or ‘Afro-American’ is analyzed.

The blacks were brought to America from Africa in slave ships and in chains during the early decades of the sixteenth century. For the twenty-five years after their arrival, their status remained that of indentured servants “who had bound themselves to work for masters for a specified length of time in return for playing the cost of their transportation across the Atlantic”(Benjamin Quarles, The Negro in the Making of America; New York: The Macmillan Company,1969,34). But it was not many years before it became common practice to hold a black servant after his term had expired. By 1640, Negro slavery had gained a foothold and the period of service was extended indefinitely taking on the hallmark of slavery.
“E Pluribus Unum”, the national motto of the United States of America means “one from many”. This motto, adopted at the outbreak of the American Revolution, was initially used in a political sense, to signify the fact that out of thirteen separate states one new sovereign power had been established. It has also come to connote that America is made up of many people from many lands, having become a nation of nations. The blacks from the continent of Africa were among the very first to arrive in America. “Except for the Indian the Negro is America’s oldest ethnic minority… the Negro’s roots in the original thirteen colonies sink deeper than those of any other group from across the Atlantic” (Ibid. 7).

The blacks were, thus, the first who were brought to America as early as 1619 and, from the beginning; they profoundly influenced the changing pattern of American life and culture. Plantation owners systematically cut off the new slaves from tribal and familial roots. They were sold and resold in defiance of family ties, sexually exploited, forced to take up the name of the white oppressors regardless of actual percentage. They found themselves isolated, not only unable to speak the language of their masters, but often unable to speak one another as well. This brutal severance of all interpersonal and cultural relationship left them bereft of legitimacy and identity.
It had unwholesome impact on their personality. The deleterious results of this deindividualisation made them rootless and nameless. Yet, they managed to survive.

Undoubtedly, the black American is the only American who had made to rely so exclusively on the American environment in order to recreate his identity. The Americanness of the black is reflected in his literature. White Americans have at least had their European institutions, values, and traditions to cling to, or modify, or rebel against. The Negro could only model his culture after the white master’s civilization that surrounded him. He could not reach back into time or history to seek his roots. These blacks and their descendants have been suffering centuries of humiliation and abuse and denial of their civil rights by terror and evasion. They have been the victims of colour prejudice and social deprivation. They continue to fight against rocklike intransigence and sophisticated manipulation of the whites by various methods and their literature forms on of the potent weapons in their crusade and protest against social ills.

The have access to a larger world of social degradation, suffering, poverty and hopelessness. Their private hell, by its very racial nature, raises larger issues of human rights and social responsibilities. When they document their own predicaments and the persecution of their community, their writings reflect their social and cultural context. They like other writers try to step out into the university by first going through the narrow door of the particular.
They have learnt to articulate the most abject kind of misery in artistic terms. Their ability to transcribe the painful facts of their existence without any trace of bitterness or anger speaks of their self-assurance born of strong commitments. Instead of being nagged by feelings at being black, the black authors try to speak their own destiny in defiance of the ruthless social order and to treat the race neurosis more as the white man’s liability than the black man’s burden. “And thus for the black writer to explore and to exhibit the rich complexity of Negro life is for him not only to assist his own people toward a deeper understanding of themselves but is far him also to be an agent of self-discovery for the nation at large”(Nathan A. Scott, Jr., Op.Cit, 340-341).

The work of the black American writer symbolizes the response of his creative imagination as an individual reaction to the black’s social experience.

Black American literary tradition is multidimensional. It is the literature of the black community and it is the assertion of the whole of humanity. It is an integral part of American literature, but it is also implicitly an attack upon the insolent assumptions of the American society. It has been nurtured and enriched by writers, greatly concerned with ideology. It is the response of the creative imagination of the black as an individual, his reaction to his social experience in America and his fated involvement in the American reality. Today the essential characteristic of the response is an intense concern with literary discipline and
technique, together with a profound social commitment. While transforming themselves, the black writers hope to promote the transformation of society too.

A black writer’s solutions to their problems leads to a protest against the irrational racial situation, to the development of creative imagination and thus, ultimately, to a new concern for art and ideology. Indeed, for the writer, a serious and purposeful commitment to racial justice and social action requires the most intense devotion to literary technique and artistic discipline. There need not be any dichotomy between a purely literary work and a work in the tradition of social protest.

An excellent fusion of commitment to art and ideology is found in the black American writings. One can discern a fundamental nexus between artistic means, that is, technique and discipline, on the one hand and social and moral conviction on the other.

During their prolonged period of slavery, the black Americans were too preoccupied with the demands of survival to find much time for the formal pursuit of literary art. Yet, they did, from the onset of their long struggle for full citizenship, produce an informal literature. The literature produced by them was oral. Knowledge about the past and about their customs and traditions of the group was transmitted orally in the form of tales, proverbs, songs, and riddles from one generation to another.
One must consider the oral tradition of their cultural expression – their folklore, the rich body of stories and songs --- that has served as the source of much of their literary inspiration. Nearly all black American folklore is descended from African oral traditions. A separate black American sub-culture formed within the shell of American life, which missed the bounties of general education and material progress, and remained a largely oral, self-contained society with its own unwritten history and literature.

Their folklore reveals a great deal about the way they viewed themselves and others, about the ways that they have amused themselves and sustained themselves in an often-hostile culture, and about the ways that they have disguised their actual feelings and opinions from white society. The exaggerated tales of humour, legends of famous folk heroes, slave stories, animal tales, blues, spirituals and work songs developed as a result of the oral tradition. The oral tradition gradually gave way to the written tradition in the history of American slavery. A relatively privileged class of “house niggers” developed. This class often represented by the racially mixed relatives of the old master, soon constituted a small, elite caste within slavery, whose opportunities for literacy far outstripped those of “field niggers”. These “house niggers” began producing written literature, which was a remarkable achievement in itself.

“The first known piece of literature written by a black American is a short doggerel titled “Bars Fight”, which was written in 1746 by a sixteen-year-old

Jupiter Hammon (1718-1806), in 1760, composed a poem entitled “An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries”, which was the first known work to be published in America by a black. Throughout this, initial period black authors depended upon a white audience. So their work often reflected the stereotypes born of white presumption.

The black writers of the eighteenth century, most of whom were living in New England, where they did not experience the miseries of southern plantation etc. wrote relatively little on the subject of race and virtually nothing, which corresponded in subject or intensity to the black protest writing of the nineteenth century. They were committed to religious themes, overlooked the obvious evils of enforced human servitude, and viewed the peculiar institution as the glorious means by which the otherwise heathen Africans were brought into the Christian fold.

Phillis Wheatley (1754 – 1784), The African-born servant of John Wheatley, was given educational opportunities because of her obvious intelligence and thereby became well versed in the Bible and in the English classics. Her Poems on various subjects, Religious and Moral, was published in London in 1773.
In spirituality, the slaves achieved an art form that provided balm for their weary souls. In her poem, “On Being Brought from Africa to America”, Miss Wheatley apologizes for her heritage and pleads that even blacks “may be refined” through Christianity:

‘Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land

Taught my benighted soul to understand

That there’s a God, that there’s a Saviour too:

Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.

Some view our sable race with scornful eye;

“Their colour is a diabolic dye”

Remember Christians, Negroes, black as Cain, May be refined, and join the angelic train” (Ibid.22).

Sterling Brown says of Miss Wheatley that, the real grief’s she experienced herself or could have witnessed are missing and that this is ‘cause for regret’.

While religion provided an avenue of escape from the realities of life, literature was clearly perceived as an important weapon by the slaves who succeeded in articulating their plight and in exhibiting an imaginative capacity to use this weapon as a potent instrument for liberation. The slave narratives such as (a) Briton Hammon’s A Narrative of the Uncommon sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton, A Negro Man (1760) (b) A Narrative of the Lord’s
Wonderful Dealings with J. Marrant, a Black (1785) and (c) The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olandah Equiane, or Gustavus Vassa, the African; (1789) became best-selling favorites among American and English abolitionists, since they were assaults upon the institution of slavery and were directed at the conscience of America. For example, James M. Whitefield (1823-1878) in the title poem of his only published volume America and other poems (1853) expresses his anger:

America, it is to thee,

Thou boasted land of liberty,

It is to thee I raise my song.

Thou land of blood, and crime, and wrong” (Ibid.228).

The slave narratives which employed episodic structure, mingled picturesque details with passages of moral persuasion and used the first person point of view, served a more militant purpose by dispelling the myths of the pro-slavery argument, urging the other slaves to secure their freedom by flight or by open rebellion and at the same time exhorted the white readers to take action against slavery in America by recounting incidents that horrified or repelled the readers.

In 1827, the first black newspaper Freedom’s Journal began publication in New York City, and in 1831 the most famous of the abolitionist newspaper, William Lloyd Garrison’s The Liberator, was founded in Boston.
George Moses Horton (1797-1883), whose collection of poetry, *Hope of Liberty* (1829) is considered to be one of the first works devoted largely to themes of protest, openly posed the seminal question of slavery in what claimed to be a democratic society.

Slave memoirs were the dominant literary form published by black American during the nineteenth century prior to the civil war. They are extensions of the folk-tale tradition in that they reveal and repeat common cultural experiences recount similar tales of the horrors of slavery, cruel overseers, separation of black families, and sexual abuse heaped upon black women by their white masters.

Frederick Douglass (1817-1895) and William Wells Brown (1810-1873), among others, emerged as effective spokesmen for their cause. Douglass’s autobiography was originally published as a slave *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) was republished as *My Bondage and My Freedom* in 1855, with certain further details. It was further expanded as *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* in 1891, and was elaborated one last time in 1892, under the same title. Through his writings, he championed emancipation, fought disenfranchisement, worked for equality in education and employment and endorsed decent treatment of the working class generally:

“I assert then that poverty, ignorance and degradation are the combined evils, or in other words, these constitute the social disease of the free coloured
people of the United States. To deliver them from this triple malady is to improve and elevate them, by which I mean, simply to put them on an equal footing with their white fellow countrymen in the sacred right to ‘Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness’” (A letter to Mrs. Stowe”, from Black American Literature Essays ed. David Turner(Columbus, ohio:Charles E.Merrill Publications Co., 1969,p.18). He advocated the use of direct political action as the most effective means of overthrowing slavery.

William Wells Brown (1816-1884) was America’s first black novelist and he was single-minded in his commitment to abolish slavery. His My Three Years in Europe, (1852) was the first travel book by a black American. In 1858, he wrote The Escape or a Leap for Freedom, which was the first play by a black American. He was also the first major black American to exploit the tragic mulatto theme. His autobiography, The narrative of William Wells Brown (1847) describes his successful escape from his white master in 1834, and his subsequent development as an orator, novelist and playwright. Clotel or The President’s Daughter (1852) recounts the story of the two mulatto girls Clotel and Althesa, the daughters of Thomas Jefferson, the writer of the Declaration of American Independence, and one of the presidents of the great republic. Brown was a man committed to the ideal of social justice and his purpose was to shake into wakefulness the American conscience to the evils of slavery.
Little time was wasted on subjects other than slavery and the white problems during the earliest periods, though by 1861, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911) argued that black authors should concern themselves with feelings that are general rather than black themes. Harper, who wrote America’s first published short story by a black author (“The Two Offers” in the Anglo-African Magazine for September-October 1959), attempted in both her poetry and prose, to include experiences transcending racial limitations. In fact, she was one of the first American women to attack openly the “double standard” in sexual morality. She proclaimed in her poem “A Double Standard” that what is wrong in women’s life cannot be in men. Another writer, Martin Delaney (1812-1885), broke with melodramatic stereotypes by showing characters capable of good or evil, no matter what their race. He urged the colonization in Central America and Africa, by the blacks.

In 1852, the most influential novel, Uncle Tom’s Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe, was published. Mrs. Stowe, a white American, a product of the intellectual aristocracy of New England is an example of the White American’s interest in the abolition of slavery. Her emphasis was clearly on the evils of slavery, the fragmentation of black families by sale and the brutality inseparable from the pursuit and recapture of fugitive blacks. The significance of the novel was more in its social effects than in its artistic qualities.
"Uncle Tom's Cabin" has been considered a strange hybrid of polemic and sentimental melodrama, a work that helped instigate the Civil War" (Eric J. Sundquist, “Introduction”. Ibid. 1). It is also thought to be perpetuating “the misconceptions, … the wrong headedness, the distortions and wishful thinking” about black Americans which have made her hero Tom connote “Meek servility and offensive minstrel-like traits” that many of them “would rather be called ‘nigger’ than ‘Uncle Tom’” (U.C. Furnas, Goodbye to Uncle Tom: New York: William Sloane, 1956, 8-10).

By giving flesh and blood reality to the inhuman system, Uncle Tom’s Cabin proved to be a touchstone for antislavery sentiment. Stowe was hardly the first to call attention to slavery’s destruction of both black and white families but her novel perfectly combined the tradition of the sentimental novel and rhetoric of antislavery polemic. In scene after scene, the fragmentation of black households and the corrosive moral effect on white conscience is her focal point.

Stowe speaks with the prophets of old, reminding the nation of its historical commitments, recording its present struggle, warning of the impending wrath of the Almighty, if the nation should betray its covenant and its destiny. The claim that Uncle Tom’s Cabin in any way caused the Civil War and that ‘Mrs. Stowe has invented the Negro novel’ and “for better or worse, it was Mrs. Stowe who invented American blacks for the imagination of the whole world” (Leslie Fiedler, The Inadvertant Epic: From Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ to ‘Roots’ New
must be considered in relation to her popularity based on her commitments to Christian faith.

In spite of the intensity of her feelings while writing, Mrs. Stowe showed admirable tact in refraining from attacks on the people of the south. Her second novel Dred (1856) modeled its hero on Nat Turner who was a black peasant and preacher. He dared against slavery in Virginia in 1831. With five followers, Turner slaughtered sixty whites and later over hundred slaves were killed in retaliation. After this abortive rebellion, southern attitudes towards slaves became increasingly reactionary and intransigent.

Never again would the south feel safe with slaves. Stowe depicted Turner as a fanatical religious prophet misguided by visions and as a freak and his rebellion as a deviation from the expected docility of the blacks. She was successful in depicting Uncle Tom as a pious, passive and non-violent gentleman committed to self-sacrifice. When she wrote about a black as a rebel she chose Turner, the rebel who failed because of his unchristian disposition.

IN 1863, Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, by the last decade of the nineteenth century, the social and literary climate for black Americans in the north had changed gradually, and enough education and stability had grown within the middle class to stimulate literary expression. This period was the first to produce writers who, in spite of persisting oppressive racial conditions, were able to maintain in their writing significant artistic
detachment from those conditions. Race relations, especially in the south, were at an all-time low. During Reconstruction, the southern white reaction against blacks who were asserting their new rights began. The Ku Klux Klan began to flourish with its regular night-riding sprees of terror, mutilation and arson. In addition, the Ku Klux Klan and other racial organizations expanded their activities as a supplement to the “Jim Crow” laws, which still denied blacks the right to vote and the right to receive decent education. In 1883, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Civil Rights Act of 1875 was unconstitutional and in 1896, the same court declared that “separate but equal” public accommodations were “reasonable” provisions for blacks.

In spite of these dismal and disastrous social conditions, a number of writers, committed to the perfection of literary art forms, emerged during this period. Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) was a gifted poet whose blackness forced him into the production of verse in dialect and it was his dialect poetry, which made him the best-known black poet since Phillis Wheatley. It is of course significant that three out of his four novels are not about blacks at all, and he depicted himself as a white youth in his autobiography, *The Uncalled* (1898). He seldom dealt with themes of protest and he rarely mentioned racial injustice. His novel *The Sport of the Gods* (1902) and his short story, “The Lynching of Jube Benson” are exceptions. He unwittingly reinforced the notion of many whites that social and economic opportunities were available to all who were industrious
and frugal and “wait”, thus indirectly supporting the “accomodationist” policy of Booker T. Washington (1858-1915), who was a pragmatic and conservative leader. He was the founder of the Tuskegee Institute in Labama.

He preached a message of compromise, of humility, and of patience. His works supported the stereotype of the lack as a satisfied peasant, docile servitor; a creature had a place, knew it and would keep it in order to lead decent life. He argued that it was vain for the blacks to attempt to take the leap to equality at once; advocated the gospels of hard work, self-help and thrift. The blacks must prove themselves, must show tangibly that they deserved the blessing of Emancipation. His accommodations policy suited the then prevalent conditions and prejudices. The foundations of race advancement must be economic not political and moral not confrontational. His emphasis on the practical and possible made the blacks meek not militant, industrious not indolent, conforming not complaining. In short, he wanted the black American to life himself by his own bootstrap. His advice did not take into account the fact that the lack was barefoot. His policies were interpreted as self-perpetuating and as permanent acceptance of servility and hence he was called a tyrant and traitor to the cause of black dignity.

The short stories of Charles Waddell Chesnutt (1858-1932) demonstrated that black characters could be created without recourse to traditional stereotypes endorsed by B.T.Washington. When Chesnutt’s stories began appearing in the
Atlantic Monthly in 1887, it was not generally known that their author was a black and his racial identity was kept as a secret for almost a decade. Chesnutt displays an excellent grasp of dialect. The insights of his characters lift the stories to a plane on which universal observations are made. He was successful in creating “artist’s reality” which enabled him to transcend the racial conditions. His novels The House behind the Cedars (1900) The Marrow of Tradition (1901) and the Colonel’s Dream (1905) are his major contributions.

James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) presents the protagonist of his novel The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man (1912) as a man who finds himself torn between his commitment to the black race and his desire for success for himself and for his family. It also deals openly with the game of “passing” practiced by Chesnutt. The protagonist appears white because of his new England upbringing and even though he has hopes of a brilliant future in music as a “white”, he is nonetheless committed to live “black”; but after much psychological torture “passes” permanently into white society marries a white, and becomes a successful businessman but at a considerable moral cost. Johnson composed “Lift Every Voice and Sing” which had the approval of Booker T.Washington and became the “Negro National Anthem.” He published three volumes of verse and an excellent study of black culture in New York, Black Manhattan (1930) as well as his autobiography, Along This Way, (1933) written largely to prove that the novel was not, in fact, his autobiography.
William Edward Burghardt DuBois (1868-1963) was the first black to obtain a Ph.D. from Harvard University and became America’s most accomplished scholar on race relations, and interpreter of black culture. He established one of the first black studies programmes at Atlanta University and founded the periodical *Phylon*. He vociferously attacked Booker T. Washington’s accommodationist racial policies. His book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) provided an alternative to Washington’s approach to racial uplift. In 1905, he formed the Niagara Movement for the improvement of the status of the black intellectuals. In 1909, he founded the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and became the editor of the Association’s publication Crisis, which provided a forum for the ideas that ran counter to the notions of black inferiority. He was convinced that racial injustice could be dealt with only through international socialist politics and not through patronizing national civil rights organizations. He joined the Communist Party in 1957 and shortly thereafter renounced his American citizenship and in 1910, he moved to Ghana and died there in 1963. His publications include *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), and *Dark Princess* (1928), *The Souls of Black Folk* and his *Autobiography of W.E.B. DuBois* (1968).

His commitment was to analyze the cultural impact of recently acquired freedom, to foster correct black leadership and to do away with the effects of being forced to lead a culturally dual existence. He says:
“It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two oneness—an American a Negro, Two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, and two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (The Souls of the Black Folk: Chicago, A.C. McClurg and Company, 1903, 3).

DuBois appealed to a black audience extolling racial consciousness and pride. It was he who fired the imagination of black intellectuals and paved the way for the emergence of the “New Negro” movement in the 1920’s. The resolution of the problem of black “twoness” became the most dominant concern of the “Harlem Renaissance”.

As the 20th century dawned, the migration of blacks from the rural south to the urban north began and prejudice towards blacks again intensified. Yet the seeds of literary excellence had been sown. The brilliance of DuBois dominated the black intelligentsia of skilled writers such as James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, William Standley Braithwaite and Fenton Johnson, whose literary contributions marked the ‘Third Force’ in American literature besides the European and African Forces.

Alain LeRoy Locke (1886-1954) published The New Negro an anthology of black essays, fiction, poetry and drama in which he asserted that black writers
“Stopped speaking for the Negro” because now “they speak as Negroes. Where formerly they spoke to others and tried to interpret, they now speak to their own and try to express”(The New Negro:New York;Antheneum,1968.,p.48).Harlem Renaissance was born out of a celebration of sensuality, a faith in a self-liberated from social commitments and a belief in the virtues of improvisation in personal affairs. Jazz was the symbol of the age because of its spontaneity. The black writing tended to emphasize a free self without responsibility to society.

The “Plantation” stereotypes and the melodramatic protest of the nineteenth century yielded place to a pride in black artistry, craftsmanship, music and dance and in blackness itself.

The sudden flowering in literature gave voice to the new spirit awakening in blacks, which became a part of the general revolt by the writers of the decade against the outmoded moral values of America’s industrial society. Black writers found new strength in their own folk culture. As used in the 20’s the term “New Negro” referred to the writers then active in the Negro Renaissance; and to the black masses, especially the young. The new spirit that pervaded during the 20’s was a renewal of “self-respect and self-dependence.”

The new confidence, which characterized the black in the 20’s, was the outgrowth of many forces. Militant new leaders arose. They demanded full civil liberties and an end to segregation. They inspired a great self-assertiveness in their people. World War I and the resulting mass migration of blacks to the north
further disrupted old patterns of life and created new hopes and new problems. The fight for democracy abroad led to greater expectations at home. The remarkable popularity of Marcus Garvey, (1887-1940) and his Black Nationalism indicated the black masses that their frustrated ambitions could no longer be contained.

The “New Negro” was only apparently phoenix-like, rejuvenating from the ashes of his own degradation. In the 1920’s the blacks cracked through the prejudices. The Garvey Movement, fast getting out of bounds, swept the country like a wildfire. J.W. Johnson published an anthology of black verse. Carter Woodson and a number of books dealing with black life began the monumental historical studies of the blacks and aspirations had been published, read, discussed, praised or damned by 1920. Unfortunately, much of the literature of this period was second-rate stuff satisfying the merriment-seeking Jazz Age readers who desired to taste vicariously a life as different from their own as they could find. With the onslaught of the Depression, the vogue of the black died almost as swiftly as it had emerged.

In rebelling against the social and cultural restraints of their predecessors, the Renaissance writers took an opposite direction that produced an equivalent distortion. Taking their literary cues from the preoccupations of the Jazz age, they emphasized the black’s showmanship, his songs, his dances, and his social pleasures, to the exclusion of other salient ingredients of his life. But they were
committed to strengthening each other by real or symbolic acts. They attempted to redefine their past by discovering a more glorious history as it was fancied to have been in Africa.

The ‘Edenic nostalgia’ of the black American literature is the black’s response to Africa. The image of Africa repeatedly appeared in black poetry. Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, originally founded in Jamaica in 1914, spread in America in the early 1920’s and was in some respects the political embodiment of the black American’s concern with Africa as image and fact. Garvey advocated a back-to Africa policy, which assumed that Africa was the spiritual, if not actual, home of the blacks. It was the first dynamically organized mass movement, which resulted in the blossoming of Black Nationalism. Despite its abrupt end – Garvey’s projects misfired one after the other and he himself was arrested for fraud and banished its significance was considerable. For the first time, there was pride and fulfillment in the minds of the black masses who had previously been ashamed of their colour.

The nationalist aspects of the Renaissance literature of the twenties – the fierce race pride, the constant sense of ethnic identity, and the lure of Africa remained a strong factor in the writings of later black authors. They were committed to the Nationalist tradition and ‘proletarian literature’ school. Among the writers of the 1930’s and 1940’s some were influenced by existentialism and the French African literary tradition. They were enthusiastic about the concepts
of ‘Black Power’ and ‘Black is Beautiful’ and shattered the stereotype of a black character as one grinning, passive and happily acquiescent to his exploitation.

It was in the poetry of James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen that black Americans first encountered a large expression in lyric form of their ancestral memories and of their irrefutably fated involvement in the American Dream. The fictional works of George S. Schuyler *Black No More* (1931), Nella Larson *Quicksand* (1928) and Zora Neale Hurston *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937) reflected the multifaceted mirror of their existence and a literature of their own emerged.

This period was the first to produce writers who, in spite of oppressive racial conditions, committed themselves to maintain in their writing significant artistic detachment from those conditions. Harlem became the capital of black American cultural life during this period and served as the training ground for most of the major writers who began their career during the twenties.

A number of white writers also treated black themes and contributed to the new interest in black life styles and culture; the drama of Eugene O’Neill *The Emperor Jones*, (1920) and *All God’s chillum Got Wings*, (1923) as well as the fiction of Sherwood Anderson *Dark Laughter*, (1925), Dubose Heyward Mamba’s Daughters, (1929) and Carl Van Cechten’s *Nigger Heaven* (1926). *The Confessions of Nat Turner* by William Styron is also an attempt, after Mrs.
Stowe, by a white author to document the psychological rationale of an incident in the history of blacks through the eyes of the black protagonist.

The first important writer of the Renaissance was Claude McKay (1889-1948), who was born in Jamaica. He came to the U.S.A in 1912 to study agriculture at the Tuskegee Institute. Home to Harlem, Banjo and Banana Bottom (1933) were the three novels and Gingertown is a book of short stories written by McKay. But it is in his poetry that he will be longest remembered. In his poetry, he expressed the black’s determination to protect his human dignity, his cultural worth, and his right to a decent life.

Braithwaite recognized Claude McKay as the first voice in the Harlem Renaissance. His poem “If we Must Die” 22 stirred the blood of all blacks:- If we must die, let is not be like hogs Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot, while round us bark the mad and hungry dogs, making their mock at our accursed lot. If we must die, oh, let us nobly die. So that our precious blood may not be shed in vain; then even monsters we defy shall be constrained to honor us though dead; Oh! Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe! Through far outnumbered, let us show us brave, and for their thousand blows deal one deathblow! What though before us lies the open grave? Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack, pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back (Quoted in Herbert Hill, op.cit. 13).
Sir Winston Churchill quoted these lines as climax and conclusion of his oration before the joint-houses of the American Congress when he was seeking to draw America into the common effort in World War II. McKay had written it as a different answer to lynching and mob violence in the southern states. Churchill made it the voice of the embattled allies as he read aloud “If We Must Dir”.

The second important writer of the Renaissance, Jean Toomer (1894-1967) published his *Cane* in 1923. With an artist’s passion and sympathy for life, he wrote about the black without the surrender or compromise of the artist’s vision. So objective was it that we feel that it is a mere accident that birth or association has thrown him into contact with the life he has written about. He would write just as well, about the others, had experience brought him in touch with their existence. *Cane* is a highly successful collection of prose sketches and poems strung together thematically into contrasting pictures of southern peasant life and northern black urban life. It is also about the search for roots and about the penalties suffer by being uprooted. *Roots* (1976), the generational opus written by Alex Haley, are his family’s origins from Africa through slavery and into the present century. Haley traces his roots and lineage in order to repossess his own history and reveals how the blacks prize their ancestral memories and find themselves as inseparable component of the America culture.
Undoubtedly, the most popular writer to emerge from the Renaissance was the poet Langston Hughes (1902-1967), who was born in Missouri. His article, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” which was widely acclaimed as the literary manifesto of the “New Negro”, urged the black artist to make full use of the colourful, distinctive material at his disposal and to interpret the beauty of his people. He proclaimed: We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter….if colored people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not their displeasure doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain free within ourselves (The Nation, Vol.122.No.3181:1926, .640).

Hughes popularized an imaginary character Jesse B. Simple, the black Everyman. Simple’s conversation with his friend Boyd served as springboard for Hughe’s opinions and flights of imagination. Simple, an anti-authoritarian-optimist pokes fun at his own foibles and mocks at the hypocrisy and the shams of his compatriots both black and white and makes his readers feel angry and abashed simultaneously. He is sane and resilient. He is the embodiment of the black’s desire to survive and prevail in the face of insuperable odds.

Hughes was rightfully called the Dean of black American letters. He reflected the deep pride in the black heritage. He published poetry The Weary Blues (1926) and Fine Clothes to the Jew (1927), novels Not Without Laughter
(1930) Tambourines to Glory (1958) and five volumes of “Simple” sketches, a play, two autobiographies The Big Sea (1940) and I Wonder as I Wander (1956), the history of the NAACP, Fight for Freedom (1962) and collections of African writing, black American Folklore, black poetry, black short stories and black humour. He was influenced by the social realism and by the rhythms of jazz.

None of the representatives of the Black Renaissance movement except Hughes succeeded in making any listing impact on the scene. The running pace of black writing slowed during the thirties. The second Black Renaissance “did, indeed, have its roots in the work of Richard Wright, who, in a scene, contained within himself the conflicting passions which, for the next four decades, defined the nature of the black American’s debate with himself and with his culture” (C.W.E. Bigsby, The Second Black Renaissance: Essays in Black Literature: Westport, Conn.; Greenwood Press, 1980: 3).

Richard Wright (1909-1960) through his books Uncle Tom’s Children (1938), Native Son (1940), Black Boy (1945), The Outsider (1953) and The Long Dream (1958) made the voice of the black Americans heard as a truly and universal song which stirred the hearts of men living an existence characterize by marginality and irrational persecution.

With the 1940, publication of Native Son Wright became the first black American author of a best seller. Native Son is the story of a black underclass youth who resorts to violence as retaliation to the oppression, hatred and
incomprehension of the white world. His novels and his moving autobiography *Black Boy* reveal the fact that he, more powerfully than any of his predecessors, realized and recognized the rage lodged in the hearts of the blacks, who had nothing to lose and nothing left to live for and those who have had to endure the bitter social realities that were the consequences of racism.

In his “Blueprint for Negro Writing” Wright set the responsibility upon the black writer, “to furnish moral sanctions for action, to give meaning to blighted lives and to supply motives for mass movements of millions of people…….. He is being called upon to do no less than create values by which his race is to struggle, live and die” (New Challenge, ii (Fall 195, .53-65).

Wright vehemently opposed the writers who pandered to a white audience rather than directing themselves to the needs of black people. In so doing, Wright though that these writers ignored the black folklore and disowned their responsibility in favour of literary posturing, which however clever and ornamental, were culturally sterile and aesthetically barren.

Richard Wright drew inspiration from black folklore. In his writings, he mixed judicially the personal, the documentary, the factual and the fictional elements. Wright attempted to administer a rude shock to the American culture out of its lackadaisical conscience and to generate in the black masse’y/s a new power of self-affirmation and a fresh resoluteness of purpose in its quest for
justice. He conceived of good and evil in terms of man-made creations. Since man has made them, man alone can change them.

“The Black Artist’s role in America is to aid in the destruction of America as he knows it. His role is to report and reflect so precisely the nature of the society and of himself in that society.” Wright realized this responsibility.

Richard Wright in his graphic description of his early life in Black Boy has woven the fabric of his evolution as a writer with his social commitments as its warp and artistic commitments as its woof. Life and art are inseparable in Wright’s works and he was not an artist who remained impervious to the environment around him. Kenneth Kinnamon is of the opinion that Wright represented the culmination of the tradition of vigorous racial and social protest espoused by writers such as Frederick Douglass and Claude McKay and by much black folklore.

His example proved to be an inspiration and a model to a number of black American writers. In fact no black American writer is immune from Wright’s influence. His work became an effective north star of Negro writing, which helped his successors to find their own directions. Native Son presents a new approach to the treatment of urban black living. It shows how these dismal conditions twist the social and spiritual development of the blacks. Crime is the inevitable product of a warped society. Wright makes it abundantly clear that individuals such as Bigger Thomas live by a strange and perverted code. They
are not likely to succeed by following acceptable standard, so they seek release from the frustration and anger engendered by the shams and hoaxes practices against them by the white America. And that release comes through the tendency to destroy others and, at the end, themselves.

Wright was committed to prove that a man must have enough control over his environment to feel that he can change it so that it can offer him chances of realizing his innate potentialities; in the absence of such a control, he deems himself to be an alien and undermines the mores and legal codes of his society. He also attempted to reveal the social and psychological effects on human beings who find themselves trapped in these absurd and oppressive conditions and how they unsuccessfully make an existence in such a situation.

Wright joined the Communist Party in 1934. Communism was thought to be a gospel of liberation among the coloured people. According to him the party taught him, “if you possess enough courage to speak out what you are, you will find that you are not alone”(I Tried to be a Communist”, Atlantic Monthly,174(August’1994,.62). For Wright, Marxism became a way of life ordering his experiences provided him with a means of interpreting the urban scene, which the Harlem School lacked, provided him with an intellectual framework for understanding his life as a black. A stubborn and uncompromising individualism kept him in constant conflict with the party bureaucracy, leading eventually to his break from the party.
In speaking of the writers who followed Wright, Robert Bone proposes that they may be thought of as forming “the Wright School” of that period.

The writers usually included in this School are Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945) Ann Poetry *The Street* (1946), Willard Motley, *Knock on Any Door* (1947). James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison who came strongly under the influence of Wright later broke away from that influence as they wished to move substantially beyond Wright. They protested against an oppressive and coercive racist environment, but to label them as “protest writers” is to cast a pejorative light on them and to limit, unfairly, their commitments. Wright was praised and damned posthumously because of his apparent commitment to the use of literature as a political weapon in the war against white racism.

The two prominent authors James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, who had received encouragement from Wright, later found fault with him. The questions how far their commitments towards life and art are different from those of their mentor and why need to be answered. An attempt to seek answers to these queries leads one to an in-depth study of the writings of James Baldwin and Ellison and their commitments.