CHAPTER III: THE THEME OF SUPPRESSION IN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN WRITERS

FORCED from home and all its pleasures
Africa’s coast I left forlorn,
To increase a stranger’s treasures
O’er the raging billows borne.
Men from England brought and sold me,
Paid my price in paltry gold;
But, though slave they have enrolled me,
Minds are never to be sold.

(http://www.geneseo.edu/~easton/eng1313/CowperNC.html)

William Cowper, in his poem, “The Negro’s Complaint”, talks about the life of the Blacks and how they became slaves in the land of White people. Cowper’s lines clearly show how Blacks came under the control of White people and their atrocity. Before going into detail regarding the oppression of slaves it will be meaningful to know briefly about the history of the institution of slavery and how it was legalized.

To begin with, in The Routledge History of Slavery edited by Gad Heuman and Trevor Burnard, they define slavery as: “Slavery was a form of exploitation in which one human was owned by another person, and in which the slave hovered uncertainly between the contradictory positions of being both a piece of property and also a person” (Heuman 1).

In other words, human beings with power and money held others who were poor and powerless under them and exploited them by utilizing them to their use by treating them brutally by giving both mental and physical torture. When one takes African slaves into consideration two things become clear regarding their suppression. One is, the Whites by claiming themselves as superior sowed the seeds of slavery by purchasing people from Africa in order to work as servants in their plantation and the
second is, the same Whites later on turned them to slaves by reducing them to an
inferior position because of their greedy nature.

Historically speaking, the existence of slavery can be seen in Sumerian culture
as early as 4th millennium B.C. But the historical records say that they were not slaves
in real terms but they were likely the captives of war. The Roman Empire also made
use of slaves to do their work and the institution of slavery was practiced by other
civilizations like Egypt, Babylonia and Greece.

The Blacks experienced slavery which started with the arrival of first African
slaves to English Colonies by a Dutch vessel to Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. Initially
the first slaves in the Virginia Colony were looked upon as workers rather than
property while some of them were treated like indentured servants. These indentured
servants agreed to work on plantations for five to seven years on contract basis for
which they received land in return. They were returned to their homeland after their
agreement got over which made the plantation owners to search for new workers.

The fed up plantation owners started to buy Blacks to work for them in
plantations instead of using indentured servants and this culture of buying Blacks
from Whites later on grew into a big institution which gradually converted Blacks into
slaves. In other words, the need of plantation owners to have a steady work force that
would not require any payment or training led to the emergence of slavery in
America. With the success of tobacco planting African slavery got legalized in
Virginia and Maryland. Rattansi writes:

The growing appetite for sugar, to sweeten the newly popular but
bitter beverages of tea, coffee, and chocolate, and the popularity of
the rum punch fuelled the demand for slave labour on British-
owned sugar plantations in the Caribbean. The infamous triangular
trade involved ships sailing from Liverpool, Bristol, and London
carrying textiles, guns, cutlery, glass, beads, beer, and other British
manufacturers. These were bartered for slaves on the African
coast. (Rattansi 30)

Primarily located in South, the institution of slavery also existed in many
different forms by 1830. The African-Americans not only existed in farms and
plantations but also enslaved in cities and towns, in fields, industries, and in house
work and also in the field of transportation. The Whites considered slaves as their property and the reason for this was their colour or dark complexion. In other words the Whites considered the Blacks as inferior and regarded their dark colour as a symbol of evil against their fair complexion which they thought as a symbol of purity. This kind of discrimination prevailed since the time of slavery to even present days. Moreover this was the main reason to treat Blacks very cruelly during the time of slavery.

Between 16th and 17th Century the Europeans brought over 8 million Black men and women from Africa to America and thereby transformed their empty land into a wealthy manufacturer of goods and services by starting trade with other countries. In short with the help of African slaves the Europeans became rich and in this regard Barbara Solow argues:

It was slavery that made the empty lands of the western hemisphere valuable producers of commodities and valuable markets for Europe and North America: what moved in the Atlantic in these centuries were predominantly slaves, the outputs of slaves, the inputs to slave societies, and the goods and services purchased with the earnings on slave products. (Solow 1)

The Europeans, because of their greedy nature, started importing slaves from Africa in very large numbers and thereby thought of improving their economic and social conditions. In other words the Europeans participated in Trans-Atlantic trade and the trans-Atlantic shipment of slaves from the African continent to America is called “Middle Passage”. Gad Heuman describes “Middle Passage” as:

The “middle” in the “middle passage”, consequently, does not refer exclusively to the period between enslavement in Africa and toiling in Americas. Rather, the horrific trans-Atlantic voyage experienced by the estimated 11 million Africans who crossed the Atlantic represents one common feature of a “middle” experience. (Heuman 217)

The experience of Africans in the middle passage was far from imagination because it was very cruel and horrible. Many of them lost their lives due to inhuman and unhealthy travelling conditions. Those who survived were later on auctioned and
sold and it was here that the initial separations of slave families were done by parting them equally on both sides without giving any importance to their relationships. In most of the cases, during separation of slaves the mother came on one side while the children were placed on another side. In connection with this kind of atrocious experience Heuman says: “For those Africans who survived the cramped, unhealthy, disease-infested, and deadly Middle Passage, arrival in the Americas resulted in slave being held in yards, stockades, and baracoons until prospective buyers came calling for purchase” (Heuman 219).

Before migrating slaves from Africa to America through middle passage, the Europeans enslaved Native Americans when they arrived in the New World who continued to suffer from slavery till 1492. But it was in the 16th century that the Europeans turned to Africa by taking part in Trans-Atlantic trade in order to purchase slaves from Africa who were physically very strong and well built. By witnessing this Europeans thought of getting hard work from these African slaves. Gad Heuman writes:

The primary purpose of making people slaves, however, was not to dehumanize them, but to use them to acquire wealth and greater resources…. Slavery is a form of labour exploitation connected to, but significantly different from, other forms of labour exploitation, such as indentured servitude, family labour, and wage labour capitalism. (Heuman 18)

Though the Europeans started plantation with the intention of making property, gradually they turned the slaves into their property without considering them as human beings. Later on the slaves were dehumanized by denying their basic necessities of life and compelled them to work in chains both physical and mental.

In the South, cotton was the main leading cash crop and slaves were large in number in cotton plantations. Apart from this they also worked and raised corn, sugarcane, rice and tobacco. The women were given the double duty of working in the fields and also looking after their families. In addition to this the slaves were kept as house servants and though their work appeared easier it was not that simple compared to field work. Because these house servants were under the constant scrutiny of their master and mistress who called for work at any time. Regarding their privacy, the
slaves working in the fields were far freer and had privacy compared to the slaves working as house servants.

Though the work load was heavy and beyond their ability the facilities provided to slaves were very inferior and inadequate. They were not given proper food, clothing and shelter and there were always threats of some diseases. Gad Heuman writes:

Slave diets were monotonous and unhealthy. On most estates, slaves received half a pound of animal protein daily (salted fish, jerked beef, and pork) and a pint of cereal (cornmeal or rice). Slaves supplemented this diet with plantains, yams and vegetables cultivated in their own provision grounds. This tedious diet sufficed for raw caloric intake (approximately 3000 calories) but lacked nutritional balance. (Heuman 162)

In spite of this unhealthy condition and insufficient working place the slaves were made to work even in their sickness without any compassion or sympathy from their White masters. Apart from this one of the worst thing practiced by slave holders during the time of slavery was the selling of slaves to others which led to the fragmentation of families. Sometimes the slaves were sold not for the sake of making money but as a kind of punishment.

The plantations in every state maintained certain rules to control slaves and those rules were called as slave codes. Though the slave codes varied lightly from State to State, the basic idea regarding the position of slaves remained the same. The set of laws which the slave codes comprised were: the slaves were regarded as property by Whites and not as human beings, the Blacks were prohibited to charge any case against whites in any courts; they were curtailed the freedom to own any property; their freedom of movement from plantation without their masters permission was considered a crime, even in self-defense striking a White for any reason was forbidden; and slaves’ visit to any of the White homes or free Black homes was proscribed. Apart from these codes the slaves in some cases were killed by Whites the matter of which were not considered as murder or crime but the whites defended their act of killing slaves as punishment for their mistakes or misconduct.
In addition to this the women slaves were compelled to endure the threat of sexual exploitation from their masters along with the double duty which was prescribed for them of maintaining families and working in fields. Taking advantage of the situation and the powerless position of male slaves the White masters exploited and sexually abused women by treating them as breeders. Moreover the children born to them were considered as an addition to their slave population. In other words the children born out of sexual exploitation of female slaves was seen as an economic asset by Whites. The rape or the sexual abuse of slave women was not treated as a crime but considered as a form of trespassing.

Slaves suffered from high mortality rate. Due to unhealthy condition and inadequate facilities the average life expectancy of slaves at their birth was just 21 or 22 years. The Whites followed the policy of negligence towards Black children but they were interested to gain money by selling Black children to others thereby breaking the bond between mother and child. The absence of a father figure led to a strong bond between mother and children and this bonding was of least importance to the Whites because they valued money more than any relationship. Due to this the Blacks became mentally weak and insane in addition to their physical torture and suppression.

The Whites made the Blacks live without any education, and any right to own property and also to move properly whenever they wanted. The slaves generally started their work before sunrise and worked till the light faded away, without any rest. Sometimes, not able to tolerate the Whites’ exploitation, the slaves tried to run away but unfortunately they failed in their attempts to escape from slavery and the slaves who were caught were meted out with severe punishments. The first kind of punishment was whipping, the second was to burn ‘R’ on the right cheek of a slave and finally punishment was given which made a slave unfit to have children any more.

In some cases the Blacks were compelled to wear iron chains and also iron masks on their head for some weeks or months depending upon their level of mistakes. The exploitation of Blacks by Whites was such that they preferred to die than to become slaves.
The Blacks were not allowed to live peacefully but exploited in every field both during the time of slavery and also after its abolition. All these exploitations and oppression led the Blacks to fight against injustice done to them and they found writing as a powerful weapon to claim their lost voice and identity. Gradually they started writing their experience and began to educate people regarding their inhuman condition and thereby gave a call for protest by organizing the people. Consequently, like Dalit literature, African-American literature also gained significance in recent years.

Like Dalit literature, African-American literature is also the outcome of exploitation and suppression which is produced in the United States by writers of African descent. The Harlem Renaissance from 1920 to 1940 brought new attention and scope to African-American literature. The reason behind the emergence of Black writing is, they felt that they alone can represent their consciousness to the masses in an effective manner than others. S.D.Kapoor in his book *Dalits and African Americans: A Study in comparison* opines that the intensity of Dalits and Blacks experience cannot be felt by non-dalits and non-blacks. Further he says that, African-Americans have the responsibility of keeping the genuine historical memory alive and also of humanizing the oppressive system.

In order to go through in detail about the problems and sufferings of the Blacks during the time of slavery and also after its abolition, this particular chapter focuses more on the select autobiographies of four famous African-American writers namely Frederick Douglass, Booker.T.Washington, Richard Wright and W.E.B.Du Bois. Among these writers Frederick Douglass and Booker.T.Washington belong to the time of slavery while Du Bois and Richard Wright depict the life of the Blacks after the abolition of slavery. In other words this chapter attempts to go into details concerning the life of Blacks in two different phases. One as victims of slavery, who by being slaves themselves have suffered a lot at the hands of the White masters and the other as victims of racism again at the hands of the Whites, not as masters but as fellow human beings. In other words all the four writers have chronicled their life and hardships they went through in the White world by facing slavery and racism.

Frederick Douglass, being a cultural figure in the history of African-Americans and the United States, emerged as a most prominent leader of the 19th century. Born into a life of slavery, Frederick Douglass had undergone all kinds of
atrocities and exploitation, which was common for slaves during the time of slavery. George L. Ruffin, who wrote the introduction to Frederick Douglass’s autobiography *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, writes:

The first twenty-three years of Douglass’ life were twenty-three years of slavery, obscurity, and degradation…. Plantation life at Tukhakoe as related by him is not fiction, it is fact; it is not the historian’s dissertation on slavery, it is slavery itself, the slave’s life, acts, and thoughts, and the life, acts, and thoughts of those around him. (Douglass 6)

Douglass has written three autobiographies, among them his third autobiography namely *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* has been selected for the research work. In this autobiography Douglass presents a vivid picture of a horrifying period of American history during the time of slavery. Being a slave himself, Douglass experienced the horrible effects of slavery and provides readers with the real portrayal of slave life. The physical and psychological effects of slavery on slaves will be seen clearly when one comes across the autobiography of Frederick Douglass. Regarding his autobiography Douglass writes: “I aim only to give the reader a truthful impression of my slave-life, without unnecessarily affecting him with harrowing details” (Douglass 71). In his book namely *My Escape from Slavery and Reconstruction* Douglass writes:

Slavery, like all other great systems of wrong, founded in the depths of human selfishness, and existing for ages, has not neglected its own conservation. It has steadily exerted an influence upon all around it favorable to its own continuance. And to-day it is so strong that it could exist, not only without law, but even against law. (Douglass 17)

The above lines of Douglass clearly show his view about slavery and he says though slavery was abolished legally it is still present in some places illegally without any fear of any law and order. In his autobiography he gives an evident picture about his life of slavery and the hardships he went through to come up in life by facing all kinds of exploitation. He was not able to think of leading a peaceful life after the abolition of slavery because there was the problem of racism wherein the Blacks had
to face inhuman and brutal treatment from the Whites. In his autobiography Douglass chronicles everything in detail which gives a clear portrayal of his life of slavery and racism.

In the beginning of his autobiography, Douglass gives an account of his birth and childhood days. He was born in Talbot Country of European shore in the state of Maryland. The place in which he was born was thinly populated and appeared like a desert consisting of inhabitants who looked dull and frustrated without any spirit in their life.

Like other slaves Frederick Douglass does not know the exact date of his birth and remains ignorant about this. Usually slaves calculated their children’s age by taking into account whether the child was born during spring time, harvest time, winter time or planting time. This kind of ignorance was not because of slaves disinterest in education instead education was prohibited to slaves by the Whites just because of the fear that if Blacks gain knowledge the Whites will definitely lose their supremacy over them. The moment the Whites started slavery and legalized it they started keeping slaves in ignorance by not educating them. Not satisfied with this, the Whites also destroyed the Black’s culture, language, tradition and religion. The only thing that Blacks knew after becoming slaves was just to work from day to dawn without expecting anything from their White masters. Whatever they got in return for their hard toil was not given in respect for their work but was thrown as if they were beggars who are begging for their survival.

Frederick Douglass after gaining some knowledge calculated his age and came out with the information of his birth as February 1871. He can only guess the year and month and not the exact date and he even gives this in appropriate terms and not exactly. Frederick Douglass was brought up by his grandparents Betsy and Isaac Bailey because his mother was separated from him which was the practice followed by slave masters. Concerning this Douglass writes: “The practice of separating mothers from their children and hiring them out at distances too great to admit of their meeting, save at long intervals, was a marked feature of the cruelty and barbarity of the slave system;…” (Douglass 10).

The institution of slavery was so barbarous and heinous that the children were not allowed to stay with their parents and sometimes the children were sold to others
from the White masters for the sake of money. The feelings, emotions and relationships of slaves had no value and they were not treated as human beings but as animals and were making them to work even as animals.

Douglass was unfortunate because of his mother’s very limited visit which was during night time as she was working in another plantation. Apart from this Douglass knows nothing about his father and he himself says: “Of my father I know nothing. Slavery had no recognition of fathers, as none of families” (Douglass 11). These words of Douglass unveil the life of slaves who were deprived of family life and the moment they were born they were separated from their mothers. In some cases the children’s were utilized as assets to work in their own plantation.

On one occasion Douglass meets his brother and sisters when his grandmother takes him to Colonel Lloyd’s plantation from Tuckahoe. The unfortunate thing was that Douglass was not able to recognize his own brother and sisters but when his grandma told him he was surprised to see his siblings for the first time though he had heard about them sometime back. He says: “Brothers and sisters we were by blood, but slavery had made us strangers” (Douglass 13). This kind of strangeness and separation was common for slaves during the time of slavery. Unfortunately Douglass received the news of his mother’s death when he was working in Lloyd’s plantation. This ended his little contact which he had with his mother. This shows that slaves were not fortunate to have a complete family with father, mother, brothers and sisters. Fragmentation of family was said to be one of the main characteristics of the slave system.

Living with his grandparents Douglass thought that the house belonged to them but later on got realization that the house belonged to a mysterious person called “Old Master”. His real name was Captain Aaron Anthony who was living in Colonel Lloyd’s plantation. Being a chief clerk and butler in Colonel Lloyd’s plantation he owned several farms in Tuckahoe along with some overseers and slaves in his own farm. His duty was to give directions to the overseers who were working on the farms of Colonel Lloyd. Douglass entered Lloyd’s plantation when he was less than seven years old. Douglass grandma was given the work of looking after small children till they grew up and be able to work in the fields that is till the children attained the age of six or seven years and later on they were shifted to plantations to work. Similarly when Douglass was just seven years old he was shifted to Lloyd’s plantation and from
then onwards his life of slavery started and he says: “This was my first introduction to the realities of slave system” (Douglass 14).

During the initial days of his stay in the plantation, the main problem he faced was the problem of food. It does not mean that there was scarcity of food; but the slaves were given very meager food which was of low quality and sometimes Frederick Douglass was made to remain on an empty stomach for the whole day. Douglass gradually began to become aware of the cruelties of slavery and its treatment of slaves. His eyes opened to the barbarous system of slavery and he chronicled one such incident in his autobiography where he writes:

One of the first circumstances that opened my eyes to the cruelties and wickedness of slavery and its hardening influences upon my old master, was his refusal to interpose his authority to protect and shield a young woman, a cousin of mine, who had been most cruelly abused and beaten by his overseer in Tuckahoe. (Douglass 22)

Such kinds of abusing and beatings were common for the slaves and for every simple mistake they received punishment as gifts from their masters. Frederick Douglass as a boy of seven years was new to these kinds of punishments and by witnessing such treatments of slaves he was mentally shocked and depressed. Once Douglass witnessed the severe beating of Esther, a slave woman from her master and the beatings was so severe that she could not even stand properly. Douglass says that Esther had the curse which any slave girl was prohibited to possess and that she was beautiful to look at and because of this she was courted by Ned Roberts, who was Colonel Lloyd’s favourite slave’s son. Colonel Lloyd disapproved this courtship and wanted to separate the couple which remained impossible. This hatred resulted in severe beating for every small mistake committed by her and Douglass witnessed one such beating by which he was shocked. All these incidents make him to go into detail and inquire about the origin and nature of slavery. He even asks: “Why am I a slave? Why are some people slaves and others masters?” (Douglass 25).

The institution of slavery was not only cruel and horrible but also inhuman and barbaric. In some cases the slaves were murdered by their masters without the fear of anyone. Such kinds of murder was not treated as crime but regarded as
punishment. Concerning this Douglass says:”…killing a slave, or any colored person, in Talbot Co., Maryland, was not treated as a crime, either by the courts or the community” (Douglass 35). He also gives some instances of murder committed by their masters to their slaves. St.Michael’s ship carpenter Mr.Thomas Lanman killed two slaves while Austin Gore who succeeded Mr.Hopkins as overseer on Colonel Lloyd’s plantation murdered Bill Denby, who was a young coloured man.

In another incident Mrs.Giles Hicks murders a young coloured girl and the reason was very simple, the young girl was given the duty of looking after Mrs.Giles’s baby and one day the cry of the baby woke up her mother unfortunately instead of waking up the servant who was in deep sleep. This trivial reason was enough for the mistress to take a harsh step towards the young girl which ended in killing the girl mercilessly. In short it can be said that the treatment of slaves was no better than animals. The slave master’s sole intention was to get as much work as they could from slaves, but giving proper facilities and protection for their slaves was of least concern for the masters. Even in the cold season, the slaves were left to shiver and though they were not in good health the masters were not ready to make any compromise in terms of work. In relation to slaves’ condition in plantations, Douglass says: “The pigs in the pen had leaves, and the horses in the stable had straw, but the children had no beds” (Douglass 38).

Apart from this the movement of slaves from one plantation to another was common and similarly Douglass was shifted to Baltimore to stay with Thomas Auld’s brother Hugh Auld to take care of his child. When Douglass was sent to Baltimore he was just nine years old and though he himself was a child he was given the duty of looking after another child. It was in the house of Mr.Auld with the assistance of Mrs.Auld that Douglass entered the new world of education though it was prohibited for slaves by White masters.

Since the time slavery had begun the slaves were not encouraged to get an education. It was like a dream for slaves which never got fulfilled in their lifetime. Douglass considers slave holders as robbers and he says:”Slave holders are only a band of successful robbers, who, leaving their own homes, went into Africa for the purpose of stealing and reducing my people to slavery” (Douglass 46). The first and foremost thing that the whites robbed from slaves was their right to education because
they thought that if slaves acquired knowledge definitely they will emerge as a threat to their supreme position.

In the midst of cruel slavery, Douglass emerged successful in getting an opportunity to learn reading and writing through Mrs. Auld who was “not only kind-hearted, but remarkably pious;” (Douglass 41). While staying with Auld’s family Douglass heard his mistress reading the Bible and became curious of this reading and immediately the desire to learn this mystery roused in his mind. Within no time he expressed his desire to learn in front of his mistress and to his great wonder she agreed to teach him which shows her kindness and very soon she started teaching him alphabets. But unfortunately Mr. Auld came to know about this and scolded his wife by calling teaching slaves as unlawful and said:

If you give nigger an inch he will take an ell. Learning will spoil the best nigger in the world. If he learns to read the Bible it will forever unfit him to be a slave. He should know nothing but the will of his master, and learn to obey it. As to himself, learning will do him no good, but a great deal of harm, making him disconsolate and unhappy. If you teach him how to read, he’ll want to know how to write, and this accomplished, he’ll be running away with himself. (Douglass 42)

These words of his master led to lose the assistance of his kind mistress who thought of helping Douglass in his education. During slavery the slaves were denied the right to education because the White masters had the fear of black rebellion against them and this fear made the Whites restrict Blacks from learning. First of all the Blacks were physically well-built and if they became mentally strong by gaining knowledge, then the position of the Whites would be threatened. Therefore the Whites kept the Blacks in ignorance by not educating them properly because as Douglass says: “Knowledge unfits a child to be a slave” (Douglass 43). If they get education, the Blacks would become aware of their rights and duties and thereby would revolt against their masters. This was what led Whites to curtail the Blacks from their right to education.

Though Douglass was sent to Baltimore to Mr. Auld’s house to take care of his baby he was not a free man and remained a slave to his old master Capt. Anthony and
after the death of his son the master also died with a gap of three and a half years leaving the plantation responsibility to his daughter Lucretia and her son Andrew to share. Obviously the slave were also shared between these two and every slave was afraid of going into Andrew’s side because of his notoriety as a very cruel and intemperant master. Douglass especially felt nervous by thinking about Andrew because he was an eye witness to Andrew’s cruelty when he punished Douglass’s brother Perry severely which was very terrible. But fortunately for Douglass he came into Miss.Lucretia’s position and once again he returned to Baltimore to be in charge of the child.

After staying for seven long years with Mr.Auld’s family Douglass was sent to St.Michaels’ in 1833. Here he was placed under Mr.Covey who had the reputation of breaking the slaves. He was known for his cruelty and barbarity. Douglass’s actual work of slavery started under his master Covey who ordered him to bring wood from the forest, the distance of which was two miles from the forest to the house.

His stay with Mr.Covey was in fact the horrible days which he could not forget throughout his life. Regarding the cruelty of slavery during his stay with Mr.Covey Douglass writes:

I remained with Mr.Covey one year (I cannot say I lived with him), and during the first six months I was there I was whipped, either with sticks or cow-skins, every week. Aching bones and a sore back were my constant companions…. From the dawn of day in the morning till the darkness was complete in the evening I was kept at hard work in the field or the woods. (Douglass 67)

Apart from this sometimes the slaves were made to work till twelve at night and during this time Mr.Covey would pay a visit in order to check the progress of work assigned for slaves and he would urge the slaves to work either in words or through blows, of which he seemed best. Douglass writes about his six months stay with Mr.Covey as: “I was made to drink the bitterest dregs of slavery, that time was during the first six months of my stay with this man Covey…. Mr.Covey succeeded in breaking me-in body, soul and spirit” (Douglass 69).
Frustrated with slave life many times Douglass cursed god for parting human beings as slaves and masters and even sometimes thought of putting an end to his slave life which remained futile for many years. He writes:

I suffered bodily as well as mentally. I had neither sufficient time in which to eat, or to sleep, except on Sundays. The over-work, and the brutal chastisements of which I was the victim, combined with that ever-gnawing and soul-devouring thought –“I am a slave –a slave for life-a slave with no rational ground to hope from freedom”- rendered me a living embodiment of mental and physical wretchedness. (Douglass 70)

Slavery was not just physical harassment but also mental exploitation and the life of slaves in plantations was the life of work without any chance for either taking rest or simple pleasures. The condition of female slaves was even worse than male slaves because female slaves were utilized as sexual objects and their main duty was to bear children as much as they can. The children born to them were considered as an asset in order to increase the economic condition of the masters. Douglass was also one among the slave children who entered the threshold of slavery at a very early age and started to experience the cruelty of slavery when he was just a child.

In addition to the work of bringing wood from the forest, sometimes he was given the work of bringing wheat to the treading yard. In this, he was accompanied by Bill Hughes, Bill Smith and Eli, a slave who was hired for this particular work. Douglass and his team decided to do the work as fast as they could in order to gain an hour’s rest at night as compensation which was promised by Covey if they succeeded in finishing their work in the given time. But unfortunately Douglass’s health got worse by which the entire work stopped as the whole work depended on one another. Mr. Covey not hearing any sound came to the treading yard and seeing Douglass’s critical position he shows his cruel nature by kicking him so hard and compels him to return to work. But unable to do this Douglass remains still which enrages Covey again and tortures him so much that Douglass himself explains in the following words in his autobiography as:

While down in this sad condition, and perfectly helpless, the merciless negro-breaker took up the hickory slab with which
Hughes had been striking off the wheat to a level with the sides of the half-bushel measure (a very hard weapon), and with the edge of it he dealt me a heavy blow on my head which made a large gash, and caused the blood to run freely, saying at the same time, “If you have got the headache I’ll cure you”. (Douglass 72)

Such kinds of physical harassment was not at all new to the slaves but Douglass as a small child was shocked to receive such a cruel punishment from his master. Regarding that particular day in which he was treated badly by Covey Douglass says: “…the day turned out to be one of the bitterest I ever experienced” (Douglass 71). Unable to bear Covey’s torture Douglass escaped to St.Michael’s plantation but he was not lucky by this act. Though Douglass narrated the story of his punishment by Covey to Capt.Auld, he defended Covey and also ordered Douglass to return to Mr.Covey as he belonged to him for one year. These words of Capt.Auld clearly show his behaviour and in a way all slave masters were the same in their treatment with no exception. Moreover Douglass says: “…humanity fell before the systematic tyranny of slavery” (Douglass 73), and the slave masters were deprived of any humanity, feelings or emotions.

Douglass escaped to St.Michael’s plantation with the hope of getting protection from Capt.Auld but unfortunately he refused to protect him and because of this he says: “My master, who I did not venture to hope, would protect me as a MAN, had now refused to protect me as his property, and had cast me back…” (Douglass 75). Frustrated by the kind of life he was made to live including Covey’s torture which was intolerable, Douglass in anger said: “What had I done, what had my parents done, that such a life as this should be mine?” (Douglass 75). This was the question which is probably asked by almost all the slaves and it was not the God who was responsible for their horrible condition but it was the Whites who were the reason behind the Black’s life of cruel slavery.

Douglass experienced the cruelest days of slavery during the first six months of his stay with Mr.Covey. His treatment of Douglass was so harsh and severe that he lost interest in everything by becoming a sincere slave. However very often he mourned his wretched condition and remembered his sufferings as a dream than reality. Douglass’s slave life during his stay with Covey was so brutal and cruel that it was something beyond imagination.
Douglass’s one year stay with Covey got over in 1834 and was sold to another master Mr. William Freeland in 1835. As mentioned earlier, one of the characteristics of the institution of slavery was the selling of slaves to other masters for one or two years. Similarly Douglass’s term of one year with Mr. Covey ended in 1834 and he was again sold to another master in 1835. His new master Mr. William Freeland was not cruel compared to Mr. Covey who was notorious for his cruelty. Douglass explains the character of Freeland in these words: “…he seemed alive to the sentiment of honor, and had also some sense of justice, and some feelings of humanity” (Douglass 84). During the time of slavery, slave holders like Freeland were very rare to see and he stands exceptional when one takes the slaveholders into consideration. Due to this Douglass considers Freeland as the best master he ever had throughout the life of his slavery. These kinds of credit taking from the slaves were very rare and Freeland was given the credit of being a good slave holder and a better human being.

Fed up with the life of being a slave, Douglass decided to escape from slavery but in his initial try he was caught and arrested for which he and his friends who tried to escape were treated brutally in order to teach them a lesson and also to make them not to think of escaping even in their dream. Moreover he says: “We were literally dragged, that morning, behind horses, a distance of fifteen miles, and placed in the Eastern jail” (Douglass 98). Except Douglass his companions were released and while Douglass was alone in jail his master Mr. Thomas visited him in prison and to his great surprise bailed him out of jail. Later on, Master Thomas wanted Douglass to go to Baltimore to learn trade with a condition that if Douglass behaved properly without attempting to escape again from there, then he would be given the gift of freedom when he reached twenty five years of age.

Master Hugh hired Douglass to Mr. William Gardiner who was a ship builder on Fell’s point and Douglass was made to learn the trade from him. But very soon his stay with Gardiner ended with a conflict which he had with his fellow workers and they fought very brutally and wounded Douglass severely. When this fight was going on not even a single White man came to the rescue of Douglass. He was so miserable by this kind of behaviour which showed their character with some even screaming and encouraging them to kill Douglass while the others were hitting him mercilessly. These kinds of attitude clearly depict the cruel nature of the Whites, for whom the life
of the Blacks was of least concern and gave importance only to the physical labour of the Blacks.

While working with Gardiner, Douglass was given money in return for his work on contract basis and his payment for a day was a dollar and fifty cents. Though the money was Douglass’s rightful earning it was all taken away by his master Mr. Hugh though he did not earn it by any means. Annoyed by this Douglass says:”...my own hard earnings, every cent of it was demanded of me and taken from me by Master Hugh. He did not earn it; he had no hand in earning it; why, then, should he have it?” (Douglass 107). Though Douglass owned him nothing his master had the power to force him for his money which made Douglass dissatisfied by looking at the brutal nature of slave holders.

Unable to tolerate the institution of slavery Douglass finally escaped from Baltimore and from the cruel slavery on Monday which was the third day of September, 1838 and reached New York the next day as a freeman. Though he felt happy by escaping from slavery Douglass was not able to escape from the problem of his skin which was like a welcoming thing to his life of racism which made his life horrible once again. He says: “In his color was his badge of bondage” (Douglass 118). The place where he landed as a freeman was a place which was full of racial prejudice.

Douglass faced two kinds of harsh realities in his life, one the life as a slave and the other as a freeman but with the problem of racism. The board containing words like “Niggers are not allowed” was hanged on every public place which prohibited the entry of the Blacks into any public places. Not only this when Douglass went to attend the revival meeting in Rev. Henry Jackson’s at New Bedford, he was stopped by a deacon who informed Douglass that the Blacks were not allowed. In another incident when Douglass had a meeting at Weymouth with a Western family he faced the same situation and he was not allowed inside the house. All this happened because of the skin colour and the worth of a person was not measured by the labour they put in, but by the dark complexion of their skin.

The horrible experience of racism did not end with Douglass but was carried on to his children too. Douglass wanted to give education to his children like others and with this intention he admitted his daughter to the school of Miss Tracy. But the
problem of racism troubled Douglass daughter in the school also which was done by keeping her aloof because of her skin colour by her fellow classmates. After meeting Miss Tracy to talk about the problem Douglass concluded saying: “my daughter was excluded from “Tracy Seminary”” (Douglass 156). Further he says:

My troubles attending the education of my children were not to end here. They were not allowed in the public school in the district in which I lived, owned property, and paid taxes, but were compelled, if they went to a public school, to go over to the other side of the city, to an inferior colored school. (Douglass 156-57)

Not happy with this kind of schools Douglass instead of admitting his daughter to a coloured school arranged to give education at home by hiring Miss Thayer to teach them. Finally after much effort, public schools were opened for coloured people and they were allowed to attend schools with others equally.

Throughout his life Douglass has endured hardships while being a slave and also a freeman. During the life of slavery Douglass tolerated all kind of ill treatment and physical abuse from the hands of his master and after his escape from slavery he entered into a new world which was full of racism and classicism. Though he was well off with some property of his own he was not treated as equal by the Whites but practiced racism because of his skin colour and ill treated him in every state of affairs.

Remembering his life as a slave Douglass at the end of his autobiography writes about his master Capt.Auld in these words:

He had struck down my personality, had subjected me to his will, made property of my body and soul, reduced me to a chattel, hired me out to a noted slave breaker to be worked like a beast and flogged into submission; he had taken my hard earnings, sent me to prison, offered me for sale, broken up my Sunday-school, forbidden me to teach my fellow slaves to read on pain of nine and thirty lashes on my bare back; he had sold my body to his brother Hugh, and pocketed the price of my flesh and blood without any apparent disturbance of his conscience. (Douglass 257)

The above words of Douglass give a complete picture about his life as a slave which robbed him of all his hard work, feelings, emotions, culture, religion, tradition,
language and finally his spirit. It was after his escape that he regained the things which were curtailed during his life of slavery.

Like Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington gives a detailed picture about his life as a slave and also as a free man in his autobiography *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography*. Washington has given a clear picture about his life of slavery and also after its abolition in his famous autobiography. It was published in 1901 in which he talks about his growth from the position of a slave child during the time of Civil war and the obstacles he endured to get education at the New Hampton University. Washington’s childhood is shaped by slavery and his story is one of empowerment. Mychal Massie, in his foreword to *Up from Slavery* says: “*Up from Slavery* is the deeply moving, riveting account of a man’s life—a man who was born into slavery and who entered freedom as bereft of education as he was in the knowledge of the proper usage of silverware” (Washington vii).

In the opening lines of his autobiography Washington says: “I WAS born a slave on a plantation in Franklin County, Virginia. I am not quite sure of the exact place or exact date of my birth… I was born near a cross-roads post-office called Hale’s Ford and the year was 1858 or 1859” (Washington 1). Ignorant about the exact date of birth Washington uncovers the life of slavery, but to his good luck his masters were not cruel compared to other masters of plantations. Washington’s family consisted of his mother, his brother John and a sister Amanda but he was ignorant about his ancestors because of separation of family members during the time of slavery. He writes: “In the days of slavery not very much attention was given to family history and family records— that is, Black family records” (Washington 2).

Absence of the father was another importance characteristic of the Institution of slavery. Even Washington was unaware about his father and got information from others that his father was a White man living in one of the nearby plantations. But he grew up with his mother who was a cook in a cabin which was used both as a living place as well as a kitchen. Working as a cook, his mother tried to find some time to take care of her children and sometimes she would be cooking late nights in order to feed her children.

Washington lived the life of slaves without any difference from other slaves and every day he was given some or other kind of labour without any time for sports
or other kinds of enjoyment which was prohibited by the slave holders. In a way the slave holders maintained it as a rule to be followed that the only thing the slaves were expected to do was labour and nothing else.

Among the work handed over to Washington, taking corn to the mill was the toughest and he faced great hardship in carrying corn to the mill which was three miles from the plantation. He was given a horse and the corn was placed on the horse which had to be balanced equally while travelling three miles from the plantation. Sometimes Washington lost balance as a result of which corn fell off from the horse and he was not strong enough to place the corn on the horse. The only situation left for him was to wait till someone came to his help. The waiting hours in the midst of the woods were horrible times which were spent with fear and tension. Besides, if at all Washington came home late he was always received with severe scolding or whipping.

The slaves were given work not according to their ability but were compelled to do impossible work with much sincerity. The slave holders did not look at the physical fitness of the slaves but went through their work by estimating whether they had done it properly or not. Though the slaves were made to do hard toil they were not facilitated with sufficient food either. Washington says that not even a day were they blessed with adequate food in the plantation. This does not mean that there was lack of food in plantation instead the slaves were given low quality and less quantity food. Not only this, even the clothing was of very inferior quality. In short the slaves were denied the basic necessities of life and their major duty was to work from dawn to dusk under the control of slave holders.

In conditions like these, the slaves could not even dream of getting any education though they were ready to educate themselves along with the work they were compelled to do as slaves. In other words, the slaves never dared to say ‘no’ to the work assigned for them but were ready to attend school during night time when their work got over. But the name of school was not allowed to be heard by the slaves and getting education in a situation like this was far from imagination. Sometimes the slave children were not allowed to go near the door of the school house while carrying the books of their mistresses. Washington was carrying the books of his mistress to the school house and he was mentally impressed by looking at the children in school who were engaged in studies and in this regard he says: “…I had the feeling that to
get into school-house and study in this way would be about the same as getting into paradise” (Washington 7).

All these hardships of slavery came to an end in Washington’s life when they were given freedom and he and his family was invited by his step father to stay with him in Kanawha Valley in West Virginia. The end of slavery and slave life led Washington to dream a better life with his step father in Virginia but it remained only a dream until Washington gained success and carved a new life for himself. When Washington shifted to West Virginia with his family members, the salt mining industry was the main trade and his step father arranged a cabin for Washington’s family to live there by securing a job for him at a salt furnace.

Actually there was no difference between the cabin in which they lived in the plantation during the time of slavery and the cabin which his step father arranged for them. Apart from this there emerged no difference between the work he was doing in the plantation because in this new place he was made to work in the salt furnace.

Later on he was shifted from the salt furnace to work in a coal mine which he describes as not only hard but also dangerous. Though a small child, Washington was entrusted harmful and highly impossible work to do both during the time of slavery and also after its abolition. In short both his work with corn and coal mine was dreadful and he was compelled to do it without any choice of his own. The work in the coal mine was such a dangerous thing that it could even take one’s life if something went wrong and there was also no scope for growth in a work like this. Concerning this Washington writes: “I have often noted that, as a rule, young boys who begin life in a coal-mine are often physically and mentally dwarfed. They soon lose ambition to do anything else than to continue as a coal-miner” (Washington 39).

Though the work was hard the Negro was expected to work hard and perform his task better than White youth if a Negro wanted to get any recognition in front of others. But Washington desired to be recognized in some other way and that was through education and finally he succeeded in his attempt by establishing an institute of his own. Because of this he left the job in the coal-mine and joined Mrs. Ruffner’s house “at a salary of $5 per month” (Washington 43). It was in her house that Washington began to realize the value of education and it was she who encouraged him to get an education along with his daily work.
Washington even decided to go to Hampton to study and thereby started his journey towards Hampton. It was during this particular journey that Washington came to know about the inferiority of his skin colour. It was a long journey from Malden where he was staying, to Hampton where he decided to go and the distance was about five hundred miles. Scarcity of money led Washington to travel in an old fashioned stage-coach and when the coach was stopped in front of the hotel he was left with no one to ask for food and lodging while the White passengers got everything arranged. He says: “This was my first experience in finding out what the color of my skin meant” (Washington 47-48).

Washington was so ignorant about the treatment of Blacks in the society that when he undertook his journey to Hampton he entered a new world which was full of racism and the colour of his skin mattered a lot rather than the conduct of a person. Nothing mattered regarding a person’s behaviour or status but if a person belonged to the Black community then he was looked upon by Whites as an inferior human being and was treated inhumanly. For a White American, a civilized man is one who “wears the white man’s clothes, eats the white man’s food, speaks the white man’s language, and professes the white man’s religion” (Washington 98). This notion of White man remained for a long time and the Blacks who did not become civilized in the manner of White men were not considered as their fellow human beings with any identity and dignity.

After the abolition of slavery the Whites enacted some laws called as Jim Crow laws in order to segregate the Blacks in every sphere of life. During the reconstruction era the Jim Crow laws were enacted by the Whites in the history of United States in the year 1865 which continued in force till 1965 and the main purpose of endorsing these laws was to maintain racial segregation in all public places and public facilities in Southern United States. With a slogan “Separate but Equal” the African-Americans were separated from the Whites and instead of treating them equally with the Whites they were considered as inferior compared to the Whites. Through the Jim Crow laws, the Blacks and the Whites were segregated legally on the basis of race in public schools, transportation, restaurants, restrooms, in public places and in drinking fountains by maintaining complete separation between the Whites and the Blacks.
After the Civil war many former slaves started migrating to towns and cities to start a new life. During the reconstruction era, the Blacks and the Whites often travelled together in the same railway cars, ate in the same restaurants, and used the same public facilities without any kind of hesitation or inferiority complex that they were slaves earlier. This kind of attitude of the Blacks were considered as a threat by the White southerners to their supremacy and feared that they could not control the Blacks and protect their supreme nature if the same thing continued. Their feeling of danger and their need to gain control over the Blacks led to the emergence of new laws called the Jim Crow laws which restricted the freedom of African-Americans by segregating them on racial basis and regarded them as inferior because of their skin colour.

The new set of laws of Jim Crow were as follows: The Blacks were prohibited to ride together with the Whites in the same railroad cars; they were forbidden from eating in the same restaurants with the Whites; sitting in the same waiting rooms; using the same washrooms or sitting in the same theatres with the Whites was also prohibited. In addition to this, the Blacks were denied access to picnic areas, beach, and parks and they were also barred from entering into many hospitals. However these kinds of racial segregation through Jim Crow laws were challenged by the intervention of the Supreme Court and finally it came to an end with the Civil Rights Movement of 1960’s.

Jim Crow was considered as one of the ugliest experiences and also the most shameful chapter in the history of America. In order to maintain their supremacy, the Whites used the cheap trick of enacting some foolish laws like Jim Crow to have a tight control over the Blacks. The Black’s growth in political and social life emerged as a threat to the Whites which was not tolerable and in order to avoid these perceived dangers the Whites tried to minimize the social contacts between the Whites and the Blacks and thereby segregated them racially.

The segregation of the Blacks was such that they were not allowed to bury their dead in the graveyard which was set for the Whites. Separate ticket windows were maintained in buses, separate places were maintained in libraries, inter racial marriages between the Blacks and the Whites were prohibited forever, separation was maintained even in prisons, and separate toilet facilities were maintained for the Blacks and the Whites. All these segregations shows clearly that the Whites refused to
treat the Blacks as their fellow human beings and always substandardized them by giving them inferior position.

However in spite of all the hardships Washington faced in his life during the time of slavery and after its abolition, he emerged as a great human being with an identity of his own. By overcoming adversities he became a prominent orator and educator and through his institute he appeared as a life giver to his fellow Blacks in order to carve a bright future for them. Remembering the kind of life he led while travelling to Europe, the place which he considered as a place meant only for Whites he writes:

I had been born and largely reared in the lowest depths of slavery, ignorance and poverty. In my childhood I had suffered for want of a place to sleep, for lack of food, clothing, and shelter. I had not had the privilege of sitting down to a dining-table until I was quite well grown. Luxuries had always seemed to me to be something meant for white people, not for my race. (Washington 272-73)

Booker.T.Washington emerged as a great national leader who fought against the Whites for the betterment of African-Americans. His autobiography displays his growth from the position of a slave child to the status of a public speaker and a Civil rights activist. In other words Washington rose to the position of a prominent orator and educator and thereby believed in education as a key to gain equality and identity in racial society. He has the credit of being the first free Black man to receive an honorary degree from Harvard University and also received an honorary Doctorate from Darmouth College. He wanted the Blacks to give more importance to education and he also founded the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama to encourage education among the Blacks.

But all his success and achievement was because of his hard work and dedication and he reached a great position because of his efforts. Similarly, like Washington another person who succeeded in his life by overcoming racism and poverty was Richard Wright who was fortunate enough to escape from slavery because of its abolition but was unfortunate in having to face the cruelties of racism and ill treatment at the hands of the Whites which will be dealt in detail by going through his autobiography Black Boy. If the autobiographies like Frederick Douglass
and Washington deals with the period of slavery, the autobiographies of Du Bois and Richard Wright chronicles the life of the Blacks and their suppression after the abolition of slavery due to racism.

Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* clearly talks about the problem of racism and the hardships he went through to escape from the exploitation. His autobiography is full of constant battles with poverty and racism. The absence of father led his mother to take complete responsibility of her family but her earning was not able for them to overcome hunger and poverty in complete terms. Regarding this he writes:

Hunger stole upon me so slowly that at first I was not aware of what hunger really meant. Hunger had always been more or less at my elbow when I played…. I became less active in my play, and for the first time in my life I had to pause and think of what was happening to me. (Wright 14-15)

Whenever he felt hungry and asked for food, his mother would get angry and taunt him to ask food for his father who had left the family long ago, which led Wrights’ mother to fight for earning three meals a day. But she failed in her attempt because though she was a cook in the White man’s house and prepared delicious dishes for the Whites, she was not able to fill her children’s stomach. Sometimes on some occasions she would take her children to her master’s kitchen and if the White people had left something then Wright and his brother would get some food to eat otherwise they were left with only bread and tea.

There is a proverb ‘A hungry man is an angry man’ and this proved true in the case of Richard Wright. Whenever he and his brother accompanied their mother, they were made to wait till the Whites finished eating. This was intolerable to Wright and angered by this kind of discrimination Wright said: “Why could I not eat when I was hungry? Why did I always have to eat until others were through? I could not understand why some people had enough food and others did not?” (Wright 19).

The discrimination between the Whites and the Blacks and the oppression of the Whites led the Blacks to lead a very miserable life without any identity and dignity of their own. The Whites utilized the Blacks to do all sorts of things and thereby marred their life for their own benefit. The absence of father and strong family bonding and absence of any moral values in life made the Black children
miserable at a very early age. Richard Wright too got into bad habits when he was just six years old by becoming a drunkard. Further he writes:

I was a drunkard in my sixth year, before I had begun school. With a gang of children, I roamed the streets, begging pennies from passers-by, haunting the doors of saloons, wandering farther and farther away from home each day. I saw more than I could understand and heard more than I could remember. (Wright 21-22)

Because of this, Wright’s mother was worried and she beat him mercilessly and also prayed to God for his good behaviour. Eventually Wright stopped drinking when his mother placed him and his brother under the control of an old Black woman whose duty was to keep an eye on Wright and his activities. In the meantime Wright’s father deserted the family completely and unable to pay the house rent, Wright’s mother placed both her sons in an orphan home under the control of Miss Simon about whom Wright was frightened because of her appearance. Though Wright’s mother disliked the idea of being separated from her children she was left with no other option but to put them in an orphan house due to poverty. But Wright tried to escape from the orphan house and learning about this his mother visited him and asked him not to escape again but to try and adjust in the orphan home as she was not able to do more than this.

Later on Wright moved to Arkansas to live with his aunt Elaine and it was in this place that he became aware of the Blacks problem of racism. In other words it was here that the distinction between the Blacks and the Whites were followed publicly in every place without any hesitation and fear of any law. When Wright was at a railway station, he noticed two lines at the ticket window, one for Whites and the other line for Blacks. He writes:

During my visit at Granny’s a sense of the two races had been born in me with a sharp concreteness that would never die until I died. When I boarded the train I was aware that we Negroes were in one part of the train and that the whites were in another. (Wright 46)

Wright and his family started living with Aunt Maggie in her house and her husband ran a liquor business. Compared to the other Blacks Aunt Maggie, and her husband Hoskins, were well off and this was not tolerated by the Whites who became
jealous of their position. The Whites even warned Hoskins to stop his business but the thought of making more money resulted in sacrificing his own life which was taken by the Whites by killing him. Aunt Maggie did not see his body after his death, she even did not know whether he was buried properly or not. Moreover she was not allowed to claim his property. Witnessing such kinds of treatment of the Blacks, Wright was shocked and asked his mother why couldn’t they fight back the Whites instead of simply tolerating atrocities? Frightened by Hoskins death Aunt Maggie and Wrights’ mother decide to return to granny to live with her.

The murder of Hoskins shows the brutality of the Whites who became furious and even goes to the extent of killing a Black who excelled at his position like the Whites. Though he was murdered by the Whites, they were not given any punishment by any law and moreover Hoskins’ murder was not taken up as an important issue just because he was Black and the murderers were Whites. If the same thing was done by a Black to a White then every law would have come to life and the Black would have been given some cruel punishment for the crime. But the murder of Hoskins by the White folks was not considered as a crime by any law. This was the rule of those days and racism was such that not only were Blacks neglected and discriminated against but also killed in some cases without giving value to their life.

In the midst of all this things, nobody cared about Wright’s education and though a boy of nine years, he was not able to attend school. Moreover the sad thing was that Wright himself was not aware about his education. This was due to his family’s poverty and after Hoskins’ death the financial situation of Maggie became very poor and again Wright and his family started their struggle to meet their ends meet.

Apart from this, though racism was the rule of the day Wright witness’s ‘chain gang’ which makes him to think about the position of Blacks in White society. ‘Chain gang’ means “A gang of men chained together and made to work” (Wright 58) and they were chained to hold them from running away. They were both physically and mentally tortured and the Whites acted as guards and witnessing this Wright asks his mother: “…why don’t all the black men fight all the white men out there? There are more black men than white men…” (Wright 58). Wright could not understand one thing and says that, though the Black were more in number why can’t they defeat the Whites by their strength instead of working silently without protesting. Naturally
Blacks were physically more stronger than whites and because of this Wright thinks of fighting back and winning over the Whites and when he asked his mother the same thing she answers: “But the white men have guns and the black men don’t” (Wright 58).

According to Wright’s mother it was the gun which made Blacks to pledge themselves but it was not just the gun but something else. Since the time of slavery the Blacks were driven off their culture, tradition, language and custom and they were made slaves by keeping them in ignorance by reducing them to a low position without giving any education to them. The Blacks were curtailed of their cultural roots and by separating their family members the Whites gradually led the Blacks to become mentally week.

In addition to this the Whites used religion to instigate fear in the Blacks’ mind and to follow the Whites without any protest from their side. The Whites claimed the Blacks mentally from every side and exploited them to the fullest extent without giving any importance to their life and family. The only concern of the White was to get work from the Blacks by supporting them.

Though the Blacks were human beings like the Whites with same flesh and blood, the dark colour of the Blacks mattered a lot for the Whites which led Blacks to face oppression in all spheres of life. Richard Wright endured all such atrocities to gain a valuable position in his life. But the path of his growth was not a bed of roses but struggled hard by doing all kinds of jobs in order to help his mother.

Poverty compelled Wright to take up some jobs and also because of his mothers’ illness Wright took up the job of carrying lunches to the men who were working in the roundhouse. This was his first job for which he got 25 cents a week. Later on he took up a job in a small café and for this he was payed a dollar a week which meant his money increased compared to his last job. But he was not able to continue his work at the café though he was getting quite enough money because of his physical inability and Wright was too young and physically too small to carry on the work at the cafe. Later on he found a job in a pressing shop whose work was to deliver clothes to hotels and sweeping floors. However in the meantime when everything was going well, his mother became severely ill and her entire left side was paralyzed. Because of this she was unable to talk and needed someone near her all the
time to take care of her. This appeared troublesome to Wright and he became emotionally weak by looking at the condition of her mother. But, later he gained spirit and started to think in a mature way and writes:

Though I was a child, I could no longer feel as a child, could no longer react as a child. The desire for play was gone and I brooded, wondering if Granny would come and help us. I tried not to think of a tomorrow that was neither real nor wanted, for all tomorrows held questions that I could not answer. (Wright 86)

Finally Granny came and looked after his mother but Wright and his brother were separated by placing Wright under his uncle Clark and his brother was sent to Aunt Maggie who promised them to send both the boys to school. Uncle Clark admitted Wright to school and everything was going well but Wright did not feel comfortable with his uncle so he returned to his mother very soon. His mother was still ill and Uncle Edward came from Carters to take Wright’s mother to Clasksdale in order to arrange for her treatment and operation. Wright was just twelve years old when he had to endure all these hardships in his life.

His mother was everything to him but her illness made him mentally weak and vulnerable. Though disturbed by this he gained spirit and changed into a different human being altogether. He says:

The spirit I had caught gave me insight into the sufferings of others, made me gravitate towards those whose feelings were like my own, made me sit for hours while others told me of their lives, made me strangely tender and cruel, violent and peaceful. (Wright 100-101)

In the midst of all these adversities Wright finished his primary education and took a job of assisting an insurance agent with the wages of five dollars a week during summer vacation of school. But he could not take up any regular job because of his studies. He went to school and during holidays he earned to assist his family as much as he could. Ultimately he finished his graduation and he was selected as a valedictorian. But on the day of graduation he felt nervous to face the audience. However his speech was appreciated with applause but immediately he was overcome with the difficulty of facing the realities of life thereafter. Thinking about this he says:
“I walked home, saying to myself: The hell with it! With almost seventeen years of baffled living behind me, I faced the world in 1925” (Wright 178).

Living in the South in the midst of discrimination by the Whites and suppression, the life of the Blacks was really a complicated one and Wright was somewhat not comfortable in the initial stages of his life when he started working after finishing his graduation. Wright’s friend Griggs explains in detail how to deal with the Whites in order to live in harmony with them. He says: “When you’re in front of white people, think before you act, think before you speak. Your way of doing things is all right among our people, but not for white people. They won’t stand for it” (Wright 184).

Wright took up many jobs and tried to carve a better life for himself by fighting against the White’s oppression and exploitation. With regard to the variety of jobs he took up he writes: “I had grown up in complete ignorance of what created jobs. Having been thrust out of the world because of my race, I had accepted my destiny by not being curious about what shaped it” (Wright 288).

Though Wright tried very hard to fight back White oppression he was frustrated by the way they treated the Blacks though the Blacks were educated and trying to find a good job just like the Whites. Whatever may be the effort and hard work, the Blacks were never left to lead a happy and peaceful life. In frustration Wright says: “Could a Negro ever live halfway like a human being in this goddamn country?” (Wright 349). However in spite of all these hardships Wright emerged as a successful writer but that does not mean that racism ended and the Blacks lived peacefully with the Whites.

Wright’s hunger to lead a new way of life was never ending though he became a successful writer and carved a beautiful and respectable life for himself. He wanted equality to all human beings and desired that the Whites treat the Blacks as fellow human beings with equal respect by judging them through their work and not through their skin colour. But even to this day the problem of racism exists and Blacks are exploited by the Whites in the realms of society. To go in detail regarding the condition of Blacks in the twentieth century it is better to go through the autobiography of W.E.B.Du Bois who said: “THE PROBLEM of the twentieth century is the problem of colour-line” (Du Bois, The Souls 10).
W.E.B. Du Bois has written three autobiographies namely *Dark Water*, at the age of fifty and *Dusk of Dawn* in his seventieth year and the third one when he was in his nineties namely *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy in Viewing my life from the last decade of it’s first century*. Though he was not born a slave he belonged to the family of slavery. His grandfather who was a Dutch man was a slave and was kidnapped on West African Coast and was sold into the institution of slavery in Hudson Valley. It was in the early eighteenth century that the Dutch started slavery by importing slaves from Africa. Later the British succeeded them and emerged as the world’s greatest slave traders by establishing slavery in American colonies.

W.E.B. Du Bois was born on February 23, 1868 on Church Street. Regarding his family, his father was very good looking and was also light skinned in complexion because of which the Black Burghardt family was opposed in New York. Later Alfred married Mary Burghardt and started to live in Jefferson McKinley’s house and lived for about two years until Du Bois’s birth. Returning to his grandmother’s home, Du Bois and his mother stayed on Egremont Plain while his father went to New Milford to start his new life. After settling himself Du Bois’ father sent a letter to his mother and invited them to live with him. But Du Bois’s grandfather objected and expressed doubt regarding Du Bois’s father’s position and therefore did not send his daughter and grandson to New Milford. Though his father wrote many letters they all remained undelivered and later on no news was heard about his father and even did not know whether his father is alive or not. Till the age of five Du Bois and his mother lived with his grandfather and after his death they moved into town living in the summer estate on South Main Street.

Du Bois studied in public schools in his town from the age of six to seventeen. Fortunately he was lucky that he did not experience any kind of racial segregation or discrimination and he mingled naturally with his school mates without any hesitation and inferiority complex. He writes: “I was as a boy long unconscious of color discrimination in any obvious and specific way” (Du Bois 75). His family in Great Barrington was the oldest and in this regard he writes: “In Great Barrington there were perhaps 25, certainly not more than 50, colored folk in a population of 5,000. My family was among the oldest inhabitants of the valley” (Du Bois 83).

Though he never came across any kind of racist activities during school days he was afraid of Irish people because they sometimes called Du Bois “nigger” and
also tried to attack him. Though Du Bois escaped from racism during his primary school days he became aware of racist problems when he joined high school. He writes: “After I entered high school, I began to feel the pressure of the “veil of color”; in little matters at first and then in larger” (Du Bois 83).

In his book *The Souls of Black Folk* which is considered as one of the influential works in American Literature published in 1903; Du Bois daringly attacks the enormity of Black racism in America and demands to put an end to this vindictive practice. During the period of Civil Rights reforms Du Bois’s book became an eye opener which inspired Black consciousness in the 1960’s, who were fighting for the abolition of racism. In one of the essays published in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois writes: “To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships” (Du Bois 6-7). This shows the hard realities of the Blacks’ life in the midst of poverty and racism which ruined the life of the Blacks mercilessly. The Whites never allowed the Blacks to rise in their life in the social, economic, political field by depriving them of education and job opportunities. In spite of all these obstacles a few came up in their life and became role models to other Blacks and Du Bois was also one such achiever who succeeded in gaining an identity of his own.

Though Du Bois escaped from the barbarity of slavery he was constantly haunted by the horrors of racism and poverty which had him worried about his financial condition, his economic problems and how to face the future. He started working while in high school after his school time and on Saturdays. He also sent weekly letters to New York Age which was a coloured weekly and also sold copies. In some way or other he tried to earn money by doing odd part time jobs along with his school education. Du Bois was the first coloured student to become a high school graduate in 1884 and for higher education he went to Tennessee to join Fisk University when he was seventeen years of age.

Though Du Bois was happy to go to Fisk his people were not interested to send him to the South which they regarded as a shameful thing. However his people’s apprehensions came true when Du Bois realized the realities of racial prejudice at Fisk. He writes:
So I came to a region where the world was split into white and black halves, and where the darker half was held back by race prejudice and legal bonds, as well as by deep ignorance and dire poverty…. A new loyalty and allegiance replaced my Americanism: henceforward I was a Negro. (Du Bois 108)

Du Bois’s life at Fisk added to the background of New England behaviour was quite difficult. Fisk was a new world experience to Du Bois. He narrates one such incident where he accidentally jostled a White woman while passing by and immediately he raised his hat and begged pardon because of his New England upbringing and training. The White woman became furious by Du Bois’s act which shocked him and he says: “Was it because I showed no submissiveness? Did I fail to debase myself utterly and eat spiritual dirt? Did I act as equal among equals? I do not know. I only sensed scorn and hate; the kind of despising which a dog might incur” (Du Bois 121).

After this particular incident Du Bois stopped showing any courtesy and behaved as unaware of what he had done. For many centuries even after the abolition of slavery the Blacks were expected to be submissive in front of the Whites. The Blacks would always feel inferior before the Whites and this is what the Whites expected from the Blacks. In other words the Black behaving equally with Whites was not acceptable to the so called superiority of the White race. Though slavery ended, the problem of racism and Black’s exploitation disregarding law and order became common and the Blacks accepted it as a natural thing without any protest for some time. During Du Bois’ college days, lynching was a recurrent horror and according to his estimation almost 1700 Blacks were lynched in America alone. Regarding the oppression of Blacks he writes:

Murder, killing and maiming Negroes, raping Negro women- in the 80’s and in the Southern South, this was not even news; it got no publicity; it caused no arrests; and punishments for such transgression was so unusual that the fact was telegraphed North. (Du Bois 122)

The above words clearly depict the life and situation of Blacks in a White society which provided no security for them. They were neither respected nor were
they treated as fellow human beings. The Whites not only refused to treat the Blacks as equally as human beings but also did not give any importance to their life and literally treated them worse than animals.

During his first visit towards the South, Du Bois became completely aware of a new kind of experience which emerged as a shocking thing to him. He was subjected to a high degree of racism when he went South to have an education. In his autobiography he writes: “No one but a Negro going into the South without previous experience of color caste can have any conception of its barbarism” (Du Bois 121). It was in Fisk University that his perspective on the issue of race struggle changed and he became aware of the height of the racist problem which the Blacks faced in those days.

Yet, in the midst of all kinds of ill treatment that too just because of their dark complexion Du Bois did not lose any interest in his studies. After studying at Fisk, Du Bois entered a 236 year old institution, Harvard University, with the intention of pursuing Philosophy and studied there from the Fall of 1888 to 1890 for two years as an undergraduate student.

Du Bois was not only segregated but also humiliated and ill treated. Overcoming it successfully was not an easy task but full of challenges in which Du Bois emerged as winner. When he joined Harvard his work was to study and nothing else. Finding accommodation in a coloured people’s home at 20 Flagg Street, Du Bois avoided any contact with his White friends and concentrated only on his studies. However it does not mean that he was not interested in friends but with the Whites he was not ready to take up humiliation at their hands so he maintained some distance from them. Not only this, intentionally he was not active in any of the extracurricular activities and also did not send any articles to college periodicals as they were not interested in what Du Bois was interested in. But he wanted to present himself in one field which was singing and even tried to make an attempt at this but as usual he faced rejection due to his skin colour.

These kinds of rejection in every field became quite natural for the Blacks and moreover the Blacks too, got used to such kinds of rejections by taking it as granted and also as their fate. Du Bois says that he was happy at Harvard because of his acceptance of racial segregation and discrimination at this time. If he had directly
come from Great Barrington where he did his school education to Harvard, then he would have been utterly disappointed and shocked by the kind of treatment he received at Harvard. But fortunately the experience at Fisk made him aware of the life of Blacks and the division between the Blacks and the Whites made him to simply accept the ill treatment of the Blacks, silently.

Distancing himself away from all sorts of social life, Du Bois expected good teaching and facilities at the library and the laboratory at Harvard. He joined the Philosophical Club and also became a member of the Fox Craft Dining Club because it was cheap and affordable, well with his limitation. His friends circle and companions were most coloured students who were studying at Harvard with whom he spent his time eating, playing and arguing. In a way they built their own world and were happy in their own way. Regarding his attitude towards the Whites he says: “Towards whites I was not arrogant; I was simply not obsequious, and to a white Harvard student of my day, a Negro student who did not seek recognition was trying to be more than a Negro” (Du Bois 136).

Though he intentionally refused to have close contact with the Whites he had some White friends with whom he went on excursions and also partied with them. In order to gain deeper knowledge about the problem of racism Du Bois took interest and concentrated mainly on the race struggle during his formal education.

After finishing his education he took up teaching as a profession and served many universities. Among them he served for 13 years at Atlanta University in Georgia and while working as a teacher his main concern was to deal with the problem of racism. Regarding the discrimination between the Blacks and the Whites in terms of law and order, and punishment for crimes Du Bois gives an instance of a turmoil which took place at Houston and East St.Louis in 1917. At Houston the insulted Black soldiers literally shot up the town becoming violent and wild while at East St.Louis the White war strikers killed and mobbed the Negro working men and the result was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Houston</th>
<th>East St.Louis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offense</td>
<td>Offense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 white person killed</td>
<td>125 Negroes killed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishment</td>
<td>Punishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colored Soldiers/Hanged</td>
<td>White Men/Imprisoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colored Soldiers/Imprisoned</th>
<th>White Men/Imprisoned</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Du Bois 269)

If one goes through in detail the crimes and punishment given to the Whites and the Blacks for their crime one can clearly imagine the extreme level of distinction shown between both and the discrimination, inhuman situation and cruel treatment of Blacks by law and order.

The Blacks were deprived of social, economic, political and religious life. They were exploited in every way of life by treating them as inferior and ineligible to do any work except menial jobs. Even in the field of education the Blacks were not encouraged. The Blacks might have achieved success in the field of education if the government had taken necessary steps to encourage them. But the government undertook some measures only for name sake and in particular encouraged the White’s education. Due to the efforts of Du Bois in the General Education Board and with the establishment of Sage Foundation the education of the Blacks gained some improvement. Initially the Sage Foundation gave attention mainly to the White’s education and the industrial schools of Blacks but later on the Blacks also gained educational facilities. According to the Whites, Black education does not mean academic education but instead they were encouraged to take up education in industrial schools but Du Bois wanted the Blacks to have an academic education as their main concern and to learn industrial skills as an extra earning thing.

In short the life of the Blacks during the time of slavery and also after its abolition was far from imagination. Though the Institution of Slavery was legally abolished by the Emancipation Proclamation issued by Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863 the physical and psychological effects of slavery on the Blacks was hard to be removed so easily. If the Blacks had tried to forget their brutal experience of slavery after its abolition they were made to struggle to lead a respectable life in the midst of a racist society. The Whites in order to maintain their supreme status enacted Jim
Crow laws and a kind of segregation was maintained. In addition to this the Ku Klux Klan emerged in order to place the Blacks in a lower position which they had during the time of slavery. The Whites were not ready to give up their supremacy and treat the Blacks as fellow human beings. One way or the other, their intention was to protect their high status by keeping the Blacks below them and because of this the Ku Klux Klan came into existence. The statement of Ku Klux Klan was: “We don’t hate Negroes. We love’em in their place-like shinin’ shoes, bell-hoppin’, streetsweepin’, pickin’ cotton, diggin’ ditches, eatin’ possum, servin’ time…” (Richard 153).

According to historians, Ku Klux Klan consisted of three movements, of which the first Klan was headed by Nathan Bedford Forrest, a Confederate Army General. The main aim of Klan was to maintain White supremacy and domination over the Blacks and for this they used violence and intimidation as their powerful weapon: “Dressed in white robes and sheets Klansman held nightly raids, lynching, tarring and feathering, and whipping black freedmen and their white supports” (Lewis 142). The first Klan was diminished by Forrest because of Federal Legislation which curbed Klan’s activities. The second Ku Klux Klan was started in 1920’s by adopting standard white costumes and also adding cross burnings and mass parades. The third Ku Klux Klan emerged after 1950 by opposing the Civil Rights Movement.

The members of Ku Klux Klan preferred the night time for their attacks by wearing masks and robes in order to hide their identity. In Louisiana, prior to the Presidential Election of November 1868, more than 2,000 persons were killed by the members of Ku Klux Klan and many were injured and this was done in order to curtail Blacks of their voting rights. Another incident of Black exploitation by the members of Klan was in Florida when more than 150 African-American were killed by Klansmen. The Blacks suffered a lot for the Whites’ yearning to maintain their supremacy and in spite of all these atrocities and exploitation of the Black’s, the Ku Klux Klan was successfully challenged by the Blacks which came to an end with the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement.

Though the Institution of Slavery and the problem of racism were abolished legally the Blacks were not free from the kinds of exploitation and suppression they were made to experience in the annals of society. Even to this day a Black’s life in the middle of the White world is not free from oppression and in the midst of all these things the struggle of Blacks to gain an identity of their own is a hard task to achieve.
But there are some Blacks who have emerged successful in their attempt to carve an identity of their own by gaining education which was prohibited to them and the struggle of Blacks to have a self of their own will be discussed in detail in chapter four of the thesis.
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