Chapter – VI

The Summing-Up

An artist is a touchstone of his civilization. He mirrors in his works the experience of those who share his world. The problem of racial conflict in the United States drew the attention of the world. The contemporary scholars and artists responded to it in their own way and documented it in their works. It opened up for them a large body of subject matter – new themes, new character types and new view-points. They have given us an unrestrained expression of black people – their hope and despair, courage and fear, satisfaction and frustration, joy and sorrow. Their literature corresponds to the reality of the black world. The problem of racial conflict in the United States affected the contemporary black writers as well as the white writers. The novel was a weapon in the war of ideas. The contemporary novelists were more than politicians to reveal the racial problem.
They made a conscious effort to place the Negro in his proper relationship and perspective.

In The Man Who Cried I Am, John A. Williams has explored contemporary black life realistically. The black man portrayed in the novel is a true representative. He is Nat Turner, Martin Luther King, Grange Copeland, etc. He is an unnamed, unheralded black slave fighting for freedom and dignity of black community, he is rebellious Black in the urban black community of the 1970s; he is, finally, every blackman who struggles to retain his manhood in a white world determined to rob him of it. He is Max Reddick who, though dying of cancer, struggles to make some sense out of life, to impose his meaning upon the world. He is the Blackman who, though incapacitated, refuses to surrender in his conflict against the whites.

Max Reddick and Harry Ames are true representatives of “coloured” community in the contemporary United States. Their feelings, as depicted by John A Williams in the novel, represent those of rebellious black community in the nineteen sixties. They are spokesmen of “black man…. in rebellion” and raise a voice
against deprivation and segregation of the black people in white racist society. Their protest is against “denying (white) women… to black”, taking “black women at will” by the whites and “the absence of black voices in the state legislatures and in Congress.” Their subject in their writings is “America or Americans”. They are successful in attracting the gaze of the world to black man’s ‘economic problem”, “social problem”, “religious problem” tied to “a whole nation’s survival”.

The problem of racial conflict has successfully been portrayed by John Updike in Rabbit Redux. Updike has vividly depicted the racial hatred between the whites and the blacks through realistic characters. Jill and Skeeter are true representatives of the 1960s. They represent an attack of black militancy and woman activism on the consciousness of the white Americans. Jill represents student of the 1960s. Skeeter is a black radical who wants to take revenge on the white Americans for their discrimination against the blacks. He acts as a self-styled black Jesus aspiring to bring love and liberty to the blacks. He expresses the attitude of the blacks through his speeches on Afro-American history, the treatment of the blacks by
the whites and the corrupt social system based on the segregation and oppression of the blacks. Harry’s agreement with Skeeter shows surrender of white supremacy to black militancy. Harry lies low during his arguments with Skeeter in order to cope with the situation without provoking Skeeter to violence. Harry’s being polite, liberal and accommodating to Skeeter and Jill shows the attitude of the whites after the riots in the sixties. Harry’s fear of the blacks is that of white supremacy.

Sex depicted in the novel acts as a source of individual freedom. The characters adopt sex as a means to realize their identity, confirm their existence, share human warmth and renew their creative potentialities. Through sex they assert their manhood and superiority.

The blacks have been realistically portrayed with their hair, arms, legs, mouths, thick lips, smells and so on. In the bar Harry sees them as “Panthers”. Jill, a white girl, falls a victim to the hatred of the whites. She is burned for having sex with Skeeter, a Negro. The burning of Harry’s house represents the burning of the house of white supremacy. Skeeter expresses his hatred against the
whites through not saving Jill from the fire because she is a white girl.

The issue of racism has fully been explored in William Styron’s The Confessions of Nat Turner. Styron has described the callous system of slavery. He has launched the rabid-hero against the dehumanized system of slavery and has entered into the consciousness of the Negro. The novel is, as we have already discussed earlier, a fictional account of Nat Turner’s rebellion in 1831. Nat represents aspirations of black man held in slavery, conceiving of freedom. Like other Negroes who were sold as animals in America. Nat’s family also was sold as slaves in America. Nat was sold into many hands and was made to realize the pains of slave’s life in the white-dominated society. He was regarded as animal chattel. Sensitive and self-respectful Nat seeks his identity in bloody revolution which symbolizes black militancy of the 1860s. Like black activists, he stakes even his life to free the slaves.

The portrayal of the blacks in the contemporary American Society is realistic and lively. The novelist has successfully
explained the cruel behaviour of the slave traders of America. The black slaves were chained, whipped and starved by the whites. Due to segregation and deprivation, the blacks were not able to get good education and technical training for employment. This fact has been highlighted by the novelist through Nat. Nat says that if Hark had “been able to read and write…. he might have been a lawyer”. Even education could not help the blacks very much due to discrimination. Nat has been taught to read; he has learned by heart great parts of the Bible, he is a better preacher than a white one. It brings no difference in his life, and he remains a slave due to the prejudice of the whites against the blacks. He expresses black man’s attitude that even as a skilled man, he cannot enter into a meaningful and respectful relationship with the whites. He, therefore, rebels against the white prejudice. His rebellion is the positive stance which gives him human worth denied by the white racist society. He proves that he does not belong to “the world of a fly” and can think and act as human being.

Nat’s revolt represents the riots of the 1960s in America. The seeds of his revolts are in the promise of freedom given by his
white master, Samuel Turner, Whitehead represents white community and is, therefore, killed, Nat’s hatred for the whites is enhanced by Hark’s oppression. Hark is a true representative of black community. He suffers greatly at the hands of the whites. His wife and son are sold by his white master. He feels broken. Putnam and Miss Maria represent white masters who take interest in mentally oppressing and physically torturing the slaves. They find pleasure in Hark’s “crying, moaning and swaying”. Female oppression also has been depicted in the novel. Unwilling and moaning black women were forced for sex by the white people. Mc Bridge, a white man, forces even Nat’s mother for sex. This incident generates hatred against the white community in the mind of Nat. Nat represents black militancy which emerged in the 1960s in America. The crime depicted in the novel symbolizes the race nots which took place in America in the 1960s.

Alice Walker in the The Third Life of Grange Copeland has well depicted racial conflict in the American society. Grange Copeland is a true representative of the black community submerged in slavery. He presents the attitude of the black people.
His hatred for the whites is reciprocal. “The white folks hated” him and he “started hating them in return”. He is unable to provide for his family and protect it from slavery and the oppression by the whites. His wish to go to the North represents the desire of the black community for freedom from slavery and a search for new opportunities of employment. Even in the North he faces hostile attitude of the whites. He finds no good Job there and depends for his survival on bootlegging, selling stolen goods and drugs and supplying black women to the whites. His failure in this plan expresses the grip of the white community over the black slaves. His sexual relations with Josie indicates black man’s sense of self-respect and manhood. The shooting of Brownfield by him is shooting the life of slavery for Ruth. He tells Ruth about racist feeling of the whites to the vast majority of the Negroes daily confronted by the horrors of oppression and exploitation by the whites. As a child he grows conscious of colour difference. As a young boy he comes to know that the cause of the pitiable plight of the blacks is slavery, and starts hating the whites. He beats Mem because she does not “talk like … poor niggers”, and does “sound
like a (white) woman”. In his illicit relationship with Josie he is
reraliative. It is to take revenge on Mem who represents a white
woman by her behaviour and desire for high status. Secondly,
freedom in sexual relations embodies black man’s wish for freedom
from slavery. In the matter of Ruth also, Brownfield is revengeful
against the whites. Ruth’s wish to get education and reach a high
status represents contemporary white woman whom Brownfield
hates. So he wants to take hold of Ruth to make her a member of
black community.

Mem, Margaret and Josiek, are true representatives of black
women oppressed by their men and the racist society. They fall
easy prey to racism and sexism. Margaret works at the farm for
financial security and is sexually exploited by both the black and
the white people – by “fellow bait-pullers and church members…. the man who drove the truck”. Finally she is murdered by her own
husband. Mem is a “walking proper … talking proper” woman but
a slave of a slave”. The racial and sexual oppression spoils her
body and spirit. She represents “New Woman”, and, therefore,
struggles to overcome the sexual and racial oppression. She grows
rebellious against an unjust social order. In her effort to improve her living standard, she reflects the desire of black community for the uplift of status. For her uplift she educates her husband and her daughters. For her oppression she tries even to shoot her husband. Shooting her husband symbolizes shooting male oppression. Josie’s portrayal as the contemporary black woman is realistic. Like other slave black woman, she has no family status. She represents black woman working at farms and in houses, who are not physically safe. As sex was not a taboo in the contemporary black society, she leads a promiscuous life from the very young age. She does not mind having sex with father and his son. Her promiscuity speaks for the desire of black woman for freedom. As a whore she earns money and respect but cannot redeem herself from exploitation and oppression.

Miss Ruth Copeland is “New woman”. She is rebellious against the white social order. She believes in social equality, and consciously participates in all the activities of the Civil Rights Movement going on in the country in the 1960s. Her daily talk about the Civil Rights Movement and desegregation in schools,
restaurants and picture shows represents black consciousness in the contemporary American Society. The lowest position ascribed to the black man on “The Tree of Family of Man” reflects white man’s attitude to black community. The attitude of the black man against the prejudice of the whites has been expressed in the end by the novelist. At the top of a page a white man and a white woman have been chained to a rock called Racism and beneath it is written: “You Will not Be Free Until We Are Free, “The position of 1964 when the Civil Rights bill was passed by the House of Representatives also has been portrayed in the novel. In the end the son of sister, Madelaine Quincy, and his black wife, Helen, come to Grange accompanied by a pair of whites, Bill and Carol. They are co-workers of Quincy and Helen. They have come to seek vote from grange for Green Country. It is an idea to live together as brothers, the blacks seeking votes for the whites. John A. Wiilliams has successfully portrayed in the novel “A Racial Warfare” in which the blacks and the whites devour one another “heart and balls”. The attitude of the black community to the biased behaviour of the white men has been represented by Moses Lincoln
Boatwright. An M.A. in Philosophy, Boatwright does not get any job due to discrimination in employment. He, out of his hatred for the whites, kills a white man and eats his heart and genitals.

Boatwright represents militant “New Negro” who emerged in the 1960s to take quick and direct action against the whites. The racist feelings have again been expressed through the unsuccessful intermarriage between Charlotte and Harry Ames. Against the will of the white community, Charlotte, a white woman, married Harry Ames, a black man, and did not maintain “race purity” concept of the whites.

Max Reddick represents the new black protagonist who refuses to be robbed of his manhood without resistance. He believes in the bloody black revolution. He reflects black man’s racial prejudice against the whites in his speech with Regina Galbraith, a white woman. Not only Max Reddick and Harry Ames but also Jaja Enzkwu, a Nigerian writer, always talks about how much he hates the whites. The deep racial hatred makes every white woman a means of sex to him. Even Minister Q joins hands with Harry, Max and Enzkwu in black man’s malice against the
whites. A black muslim, Minister Q is a leader of an anti-white group and advocates the murder of white man. He is “an untainted, pure African Negro”. He is “all muscle and three yards wide”. As a molder in a foundry, he worked all day like a slave. Later he became the spokesman of the blacks. He stands for blatant activism. He is a “New Negro” who works for black man’s self-identity, a profound pride in his social origins, and a deep respect for his culture. He encourages the blacks “for black manhood … dignity, pride….” and to “Defend yourselves…. strike to hurt, strike to maim the whites”.

John A. Williams has given us a vivid picture of black-and-white tense relationship, the wretched life of the American Negroes and their “getting excited about desegregation”. He has thrown ample light, through the statements of the black and the whites, on the laws made in the favour of the blacks, and the failure of the courts and the police to implement them due to the strong opposition of the whites. Through the Delaware incident, Williams has portrayed the differentiation in the field of education on the basis of colour, and the reaction of the blacks against this
segregation and discrimination. The scene and situation of the race riots of the 1960s have been depicted through the trains going “southward over the blood-red fields, the crowded Negro cars filled with people carrying bags and launchies.”

The Negroes have realistically been depicted with their communal habits and habiliments. Prof. Bazzam, a staunch supporter of the Black Movement, is a true Negro. He wears a beret, a polka dotted tie and a zoot suit and black knob shoes. His lips are as red as the inside of a watermelon. The Negroes have been presented in their African dresses – kentes, agbadas, shamas, etc. The black women have been portrayed with “their hair short…. in African style”.