Chapter One

Black Man in White America: Sufferings and Struggles

Studies pertaining to any aspect of the Afro-American society have to be made necessarily with reference to their history, for their life had been uniquely conditioned by the peculiar situation in which they lived. Literature being the verbal expression of a community's thoughts, sentiments and imagination, the factors that shape and inflect the imaginative faculties and thinking patterns of that community are of crucial importance in the understanding and evaluation of their literature. Black American literature, as Houston A. Baker Jr. has remarked, "like the Back American himself, is to a large extent a social product" (xvi). Studies in Afro-American literature, therefore, tend to take socio-historic dimensions and directions. A comprehensive understanding of the black people's history is an inevitable pre-requisite for the study of any trend, movement or aspect of their literature.

The present study is purported to evaluate the impact of the phenomenon of black nationalism and black Muslim movements on the literature of the people of African origin in America. But an elucidation of the socio-political and religious implications of the Islam experience and the conditions and factors that engendered this phenomenon would be of considerable help in this regard.
Negroes or Afro-Americans

The black community in America is described variously as Negroes, Afro-Americans, Coloured people etc. More than twenty-two millions in number, the black people in America today comprise a considerably large chunk of the American population. They form a community and stand as a body separate from the white majority of the American population. Who are these people? What is the general character of this people? What makes them different and isolated from the rest? What are the outstanding features that constitute their present identity? What had been the experiences that shaped their mindset and nature?

The very fact that the Blacks in America are being described differently as Negroes, Coloured people, Afro-Americans etc. indicates that their identity and naming depend a lot on the attitudes taken towards them with varying degrees of respect. They are people of African origin and they have about four hundred years' history in America. The peculiar kind of experience that they had in America has evolved them into a community of their own. They are today neither like the rest of their race in Africa where their ancestral past lies, nor like the Whites in America with whom they had about four hundred years of social inter-action. The Negro or the black American, as Richard Wright, the renowned Afro-American novelist, has pointed out, "means something not racial or biological, but something purely social, something made in the United States" (White... 80). Ralph Ellison in Shadow and Act, throws further light on the matter:
It is not skin color which makes a Negro American but cultural heritage as shaped by the American experience, the social and political predicament; a sharing of that "concord of sensibilities" which the group expresses through historical circumstances and through which it has come to constitute a subdivision of the larger American culture. Being a Negro American has to do with the memory of slavery and the hope for emancipation and the betrayal by allies and the revenge and contempt inflicted by our former masters after the Reconstruction, and the myths, both Northern and Southern, which are propagated in justification of that betrayal. It involves, too, a special attitude toward the waves of immigrants who have come later and passed us by. (136)

The black American or the Negro is thus to be recognised as "something purely social" and as a product of a cultural heritage as shaped by the American experience, the social and political predicament. Recognition of this fact will enable one to understand their literature in terms of a socio-historical framework.

The black people's history in America begins with the exploration and conquest of this continent as early as the seventeenth century. The vulnerability of the African states and the rich promises of the African soil coupled with a heavy demand for agricultural labourers together brought about the condition favourable for the white Europeans, especially the Englishmen with their ruthless and inhuman profit-motive and the spirit of adventure, to undertake the profitable enterprise of capturing the Africans, shipping them to the new world and selling them
there as slaves. The first ship carrying slaves from Africa, a ship of the Royal Dutch Navy, is held to have reached the harbour at Jamestown, Virginia, in the late summer of 1619.

The arrival of the Dutch ship at Jamestown harbour was only the beginning. Following this was a long period of slave trade, of slave hunting in Africa and slave-marketing in the labour-starved America. Millions of Africans were, thus, brutally and inhumanly captured and shipped to the new continent. Of the many millions thus brought in ships in the most unhygienic conditions worse than that of merchandises, many lost their lives and many others suffered indescribable hardships. Those who managed to survive were only to start their long drama of misery in the American continent.

**African States and the Christian Purpose in Slavery**

The European Christians who made their African expeditions and started the lucrative trade in African slaves were not without a religious interest in the matter. So far as they were concerned, Africa was a dark, unexplored continent inhabited by uncivilized and uncultured barbarians practising the strange and occult primitive religion of theirs and with a set of diabolic beliefs and superstitions indicative of their low cultural standards. They were heathens who had not yet been familiarized with the message of Christianity. The explorers were enthusiastic about extending the message of Christianity to them. They even justified the capture of Africans and selling them as merchandise or the institution of slavery and the slave trade on Christian grounds. Slavery, they thought, will bring them closer to Christianity in the white world. Better be Christians and
slaves than be heathens and free, they thought. Being a heathen one's soul is in bonds while Christianity liberates one's soul though one's body is to be held in bondage in the process. Thus, as the Church records and later historians reveal, the early slave traders among the Europeans had the sanction of religion and the support of Church in their devilish trafficking.

The religious interest in slave trade gave greater impetus to this enterprise and immensely encouraged them in their business. But the European colonizers of Africa, unfortunately, had been totally unmindful of the culture, civilization, religion and the rest of the significant aspects of the life of the Africans in the states from where they shipped large number of slaves. In their religious fervour and commercial enthusiasm, they failed to make any genuine study of the intellectual, cultural, civilizational and religious peculiarities of their African victims and jumped to conclusions that they were to be forcefully enslaved and Christianized. C. Eric Lincoln observes:

...the African moral codes were consistent with the notion of One God of all people, a notion which has not always been honored in the breach in the West. The slave trader saw none of this. He understood less than he saw, and cared about less than he understood. After all, "the English errand in Africa was not (the search for) a new or perfect community, but a business trip!" The great civilizations the Africans had raised at Ghana, at Mele, et Jenne, Songhay, and Timbuktu, their art, their religion, their culture meant nothing to the men who came bringing Bibles, trinkets, and chains. (Race... 30)
Even a cursory reading of the history of the African states from where these slaves were brought will bring to light the error in the European judgement of Africans in the seventeenth century. In fact, the territory from which the vast majority of Africans came to the new world stretched for more than 3000 miles from Senegal River in the bulge of Africa to the southern tip of the present Portuguese Angola. Within the different physical environments of this expanse were found distinct variations in the physical structure of the inhabitants, a multiplicity of tongues, and diverse cultures. Leslie H. Fishel Jr. and Benjamin Quarles, the authors of *The Black American: A Brief Documentary History*, argue thus:

Today a great body of historical information is becoming available for a revitalized study of Africa's rich pre-colonial past. Viewing tribal Africa, as it was at the beginning of the modern period in 1500, the contemporary observer sees ever more clearly that it was not a scene of social chaos and stagnation, nor were its peoples little more than retarded children. Many myths about Africa are destined to disappear, among them the centuries-old belief that the inhabitants of the West Coast lived in barbarism and savagery before the coming of the Europeans. (3)

The first Europeans to reach the West Coast of Africa were officials and traders interested more in profits and loss than in native cultures. Moreover, they observed Africa's indigenous peoples with a western eye, one that regarded a difference in culture as inferiority in culture. Nevertheless, an increasing body of materials is becoming
available for a study of Africa before the colonial period. And, therefore, today's historian is able to present a more balanced view of pre-colonial Africa than were his predecessors. It was Leo Frobenius, an ethnologist who, according to Fishel and Quarles, first brought to the study of Africa no preconceived notions of the inferiority of the native cultures. His attempts yielded a lot of useful information.

Fishel and Quarles further note that according to Leo Frobenius, who after extensive travels wrote *The Origin of African Civilization*, the civilization prevalent in the African states in the sixteenth century was not of any inferiority of any kind as has been conceived of it by the Europeans. He has stated that he got a good deal of information about fifteen Negro kingdoms representing the flowering of the medieval Muslim civilizations in the western Sudan. These Kingdoms, with their imperial organizations, their trade networks, their arts, their great store of temples, priests and religious rites, reveal an order of civilization comparing favourably with their contemporaneous European counterparts. Ghinea, Melli, and Timbuktu were three of the famous African Kingdoms where great civilizations prevailed when the Europeans captured their citizens in large numbers and carried them away to the slave-markets in the American coast.

Started with the sanction and support of the church and facilitated by the favourable conditions of growing demand for agricultural labourers, slave trade soon got established as a highly profitable enterprise. A triangular trade relation came into being: industrial goods of England to Africa; African slaves to the Americas; the agricultural produces of America such as cotton, sugarcane and tobacco to England.
This was the basis of the world trade that helped the trade in African slaves thrive. The defeat and expulsion of the Moors from Spain and the internal dissension that went on inside the African states were other factors that contributed to the growth of slave trade.

Although the epic story of the black men in America began with the earliest explorers of the early sixteenth century, their presence in America as settlers began only in the second decade of the seventeenth century as they were brought there as slaves.

From Indentured Servants to Genuine Slaves

The long caravan of Africans brought to the new world against their will started, as pointed out earlier, in 1619 when twenty Blacks landed at Jamestown, Virginia. Apparently, this first few were treated in a manner similar to white indentured servants, and after a period of labour could obtain their freedom. They were not treated as genuine slaves. Indeed, as late as 1660, no laws existed in Virginia concerned with slavery, but during the last quarter of the seventeenth century the slave-trade, promoted primarily by the Royal African Company of England, increased dramatically, and the treatment of the slaves became harsher. Wayne Charles Miller, the author of *A Comprehensive Bibliography for the Study of American Minorities*, points out:

By 1708, there were approximately 12,000 Blacks and 18,000 Whites in the colony and by 1758 those numbers had increased to approximately 120,000 Blacks and 173,000 Whites. In 1661 Virginia made statutory recognition of slavery preceded only by Massachusetts in 1641 and
Connecticut in 1650; Maryland followed in 1663, New York and New Jersey in 1664, South Carolina in 1682, Rhode Island and Pennsylvania in 1700, North Carolina in 1715, and Georgia in 1750. By that year the "peculiar institution" had been introduced and recognized throughout the colonies. In part, it had been created out of the white man's fear of the growing number of Blacks in America, and, in fact, in the Carolinas, Whites saw themselves outnumbered by 90,000 to 40,000 in 1765. While the actual reasons for slavery were economic, the white man's rationalization often expressed itself in the argument that Blacks were "heathens" and needed to be enslaved in order to come in contact with western world culture and Christianity. (3)

**Early Resistance**

The Africans had started their heroic resistance to slavery, to be very precise, on the African mainland itself, as they were being caught and enslaved. It continued ever since in their new surroundings with varied intensity and magnitude. The desire for freedom began to dominate their thoughts as slavery got institutionalized.

As early as 1658, a group of Blacks and Indians rebelled in Hartford, Connecticut; in 1712 Blacks revolted in New York, burning a building and shooting nine white men before the uprising was put down and twenty one of the Blacks executed; in the same city in 1741 fears of a slave uprising led to the execution of thirty-one more eighteen hanged and thirteen burned alive; two years before, in 1739, twenty five Whites
were killed in an insurrection in Stono, South Carolina. These conspiracies and armed conflicts were the surface manifestations of the tensions created by the institution of slavery.

**Slavery in the North and the South**

The conditions of slavery in the southern states were quite different from that of the northern states. Throughout the Middle Atlantic area and New England, a combination of the humanitarianism and the lack of any continuing economic need led to the diminution of slavery. In the South, however, developments differed radically. Industrial revolution and the invention of the cotton gin paved the way for the transformation of the South from an agricultural economy dependent upon the production of tobacco, rice, indigo and other crops to an economy essentially dependent on the crop-cotton. England would import as much as could be produced; and in order to produce as much as possible, the southern states, particularly the areas opening to the west, found an overwhelming economic need for cheap labour. Blacks, they thought, could provide the answer, and in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the importation of slaves greatly increased. By 1830, there were more than two million slaves; 1,300,000 in the South Atlantic states, and 604,000 in the rapidly developing Deep South.

**Status of the Slaves in the Early Period**

Life for black Americans within the system of slavery was based on the premise that they were not people, but property. They had no legal rights. They could not engage in commerce. They could not socialize
with Whites or freed Blacks. They could not assemble unless supervised by a white man. They could not defend themselves against Whites. They could not leave the plantation without the owner's approval. They could not give testimony in courts of law. They could not possess firearms. In short, they had no rights at all—except the right to work in a system in which they accrued no money and made no gains.

Black women could be raped by white men or slaves slain by white men and the crimes would be considered simply as matters involving the violation of property rights of another man. On the other hand, slaves who violated the white man's codes were swiftly brought to "justice"—either in the regular courts or, in some states, before specially constituted slave tribunals. The punishments were harsh: rape of a white woman, arson and murder were punishable by death; lesser crimes by incarceration, branding or whipping. Runaways were frequent. In order to prevent them, counties were divided into "beats" and patrolled by Whites in quasi-militia systems that formed the historical precedent for the later activities of the Ku Klux Klan and other organized groups. A lost slave meant a loss of money to the owner; in 1860, from $1,000 in Virginia to $1,500 in Louisiana for a field hand. Such prices led to large-scale breeding with traders courting their "produce" around in chains and owners bragging about how fecund their possessions could be. Such a system, including the practice of selling different members of black families to different owners, wreaked havoc with possible family life among the African population.
The predicament of the black man in America, ever since his arrival, has been one of sufferings of various kinds. His energy has been spent in large sums against his will in the making of modern America. Its agriculture and industry and other areas of development owe a lot to him but for whose service America would still have been a wilderness. It is the four hundred years' efforts of the black community that fetched America its present day prosperity. Today America is undoubtedly the most powerful and the most developed nation in the world. Superficially, America may appear the peaceful, ideal state dreamt of in the Bible. But, in reality, it is a society seriously at odds with itself, in which contending forces are momentarily and fortuitously stabilized. Latent tensions and turmoil in the social structure have vexed the nation for long now. These tensions pertain to the Black-White relationships and the predicament of the black man in America. What has been the genuine response of America to its black children? Has it been ungrateful to them in spite of all their great services?

"From the first painful encounter between the man ripped from African soil and the man determined to make him a slave," William M. Chace and Peter Collier remark in their work Justice Denied: the Black Man in White America, "racism has been a part of our institutions and laws, our culture and ourselves" (v). Racism has been the factor that determined the character of the black man's predicament in America since his arrival here. For Richard Wright, "The history of the Negro in America is the history of America written in vivid and bloody terms... It is the history of men who tried to adjust themselves to a world whose
laws, customs and instruments of force were leveled against them. The Negro is America's metaphor" (v).

What were the different changes that the black people had in America? What later transformations did they undergo over the years? These are questions worth considering in any study about them.

Fish out of Water

The Africans ripped from their native soil and surroundings and brought to the strange surroundings in the comparatively uninhabited America of the seventeenth century would definitely have felt themselves like fish out of water. For, they were made to undergo strange experiences of slavery in an alien world. Separated from their families and familiar ways of life, the Africans might have found life an unwanted burden. They lost touch with their families, friends, their familiar society, condition of life, religion, language and above all their civilization. For them, life in America had been a process of gradual de-Africanization. They were destined to forfeit whatever African traits they had.

The first prominent thing that these Africans had to painfully forfeit might have been their language. The Africans brought to the new world didn't all speak the same language. They spoke several regional languages of Africa. In the new circumstances, Africans in areas of English occupation were forced to learn and speak English. Marvellous and heroic attempts such as the one on the part of Kunta Kinte, the protagonist of Alex Haley's Roots, might have been made not to forget their language. This had been quite possible for the first generation of slaves. But from the generation of Blacks born in the New World
onwards, it failed gradually, and their native tongues gave way to English, the language of their masters.

Along with language, they gradually lost hold of their culture, myths, folklore traditions, heritage and history. They were forced to give up their names and their religions and accept new Christian names, and follow the religion of their white masters. A majority of the Africans enslaved in America were Muslims of the various Islamic traditions of Africa. Followers of other pagan and tribal religions of Africa too were of considerable number among the enslaved Africans. The white masters had no concern for the religious faith and other spiritual matters of the enslaved Africans. In their view, these black men were not proper human beings, but only their valuable possessions like cattle. For them the question of their cultural and religious integrity was not an issue at all.

But the Africans who were subjected to such cruel treatment did not take all these lightly. For them, the steps taken by the white slave-owners to Americanize and Christianize them were steps to deprive them of their true African identity. The gradual process by which they lost their African names, religion, language, culture, tradition, mythology, folklore beliefs and rites was, for them, a kind of death. This threat was vehemently resisted at all these stages. But they were brutally and mercilessly suppressed. No attempt on the side of the Africans to preserve their Africanness was tolerated by the white slave masters. It often led to indescribable violence. William M. Chace and Peter Collier note:

The encounter between black and white has increased in complexity with each decade. Often it has erupted in sudden,
terrifying violence; but it has also produced a more subtle kind of violence: that seen in the bitterness and frustration of the generations of black people who, instead of taking weapons have sought to "adjust themselves," as Wright says, to a land and a people who wanted no part of them. Ever since they were brought to the New World in chains, black people have wanted only to become citizens with all the liberties others enjoy as a birthright. But America has been hostile to this aspiration, and in its hostility, it has made the black man a symbol of its own limitations. (v)

Thus the three centuries' slavery of the Africans in America was the long history of the denial of justice and genuine rights. The building of the new world in America with the unpaid service of the slaves was ironically a process of destroying the centuries-old and long-cherished African civilization of the black men.

**Black Man Comes to Terms**

After a period of resistance, the black people in America had to contain their feelings and protests in mind, keep their sentiments suppressed and come to terms with the realities of the new world. Though slowly, they had to passively accept the new role in the new surroundings. This process of reconciliation was almost complete by the second and third generations of slaves. Attempts to protect their faith, culture and identity were quite rare now. Because, by now they had lost their African identity characterized by self-respect and high moral standards and come to terms with the new situations. The new identity
was neither of their African ancestors nor of their white slave masters.

The new role was characterized by a great deal of moral and cultural degradation, and loss of purpose in life. It was a mechanical existence wherein morality, ethics and aesthetics, the achievements of civilization in general, had no value or significance. It was merely an attempt to eke out a meagre existence. They were, in a sense, being moulded into a new race of men with an inherent sense of inferiority - cultural, moral and intellectual. With the loss of identity they lost their sense of self-respect. Loss of self-respect and the bitter experiences of slavery and low level of life together, naturally, created a sense of inferiority in them. This was how black men or Africans gradually became "Negroes" with a mindset peculiar to them and thought patterns characterized by their new role in life. Occasional resistances leading to violence were not for the preservation of their African identity but reactions to the atrocities unleashed on them and to the denial of justice and genuine rights as human beings.

**Doctrines of Negro Inferiority and Pro-Slavery Arguments**

Black American, as pointed out by Richard Wright, means something purely social; something made in the United States. The Negro, as he has been called by the Whites, was not the name of the race, but of a people who came into being in the peculiar life-conditions in the United States. A variety of factors could be found to have contributed to the making of this people with the peculiarities they are held to have today. Prominent among them are their being ripped from the African soil and their being made to forfeit their identity in the conditions of slavery
The white slave owners had propounded certain doctrines, religious as well as scientific, to establish the inherent inferiority of the black people. In fact, these doctrines, in the true sense, didn't have the support either of science or of biblical teachings. But the crooked, profit-minded, white slave owners were bent on misinterpreting science and religion to suit their interests. Scientists as well as the Churchmen mischievously and malevolently used their machinery in the wrong way to justify the evil institution of slavery. A. Bruce Franklin in his *Prison Literature in America: the Victim as Criminal and Artist* observes:

Prior to the 1830s, open assertion of the "permanent inferiority" of Blacks "were exceedingly rare." In fact, many eighteenth century and early nineteenth century apologists for slavery defended it as a means of "raising" and "civilizing" this poor, benighted, childlike Negro. But in the 1830s there emerged in America a worldview based on the belief that Blacks were inherently a race inferior to Whites, and as part of this worldview there developed a scientific theory of Blacks as beings halfway, between animals and white people. This was part of the shift of Blacks from their role as children, appropriate to a professedly patriarchal society which offered them the opportunity of eventual development into adulthood, into their role as subhuman beasts of burden, the permanent mainstay of the labor force of expanding agribusiness. (8)

Slavery by this time, in fact, had gone through a fundamental
change completing its evolution from a predominantly small-scale quasi-domestic institution appended to hand tool farming and manufacture into the productive base of an expanding agricultural economy utilizing machinery to process the harvested crops and pouring vast quantities of agricultural raw materials, principally cotton, into developing capitalist industry in the northern states and England. A. Bruce Franklin further states:

By 1833 this worldview had been scientifically formulated in Richard Colfax's *Evidence Against the Views of the Abolitionists, Consisting of Physical and Moral Proofs of the Natural Inferiority of the Negroes* (New York, 1833). In his researches into the skulls and facial angles of Negroes, Colfax prefigured the developed science of the 1840s and 1850s known as the "American School of Ethnology." He argued that "the acknowledged manner of the Negro's intellect only coincides with the shape of his head." This can be readily seen in the Negro's "facial angle" which was "almost to a level with that of a brute." Colfax concludes that Negroes are halfway between animals and white people: the Negroes, whether physically or morally considered, are so inferior as to resemble the brute creation as nearly as they do the white species. (9)

Following Colfax's theory, by the late 1830s, came a body of scientific literature dedicated to demonstrating that the black man was a member of a separate and permanently inferior species. As a culmination of all these, according to Franklin, in the early 1840s came the theory of
polygenesis. Scientists like Dr. Samuel George Morton tried to scientifically establish that Negroes did not descend from Adam but were a distinct and subhuman species originating in southern Africa.

In the subsequent years, slavery attracted a host of able defenders, as it became a flourishing institution. Leslie H. Fishel Jr. and Benjamin Quarles in their documentary history of the black people illustrate this with evidences. Ranking high among them was the Virginia lawyer, George Fitzhugh, who wrote two books: *Sociology for the South: or the Failure of Free Society* (1854) and *Cannibals All! or, Slaves without Masters* (1857) and several articles in justification of the south's way of life. If Fitzhugh had had his way, no critic of slavery would have been employed as a teacher in the south, and no book critical of slavery would have been permitted in the schools. Fitzhugh propounded a so-called universal law of slavery, a viewpoint stemming from his belief in the natural inequality of man.

James Henry Hammond, a wealthy plantation owner from South Carolina, in a senate speech on March 4, 1858, set forth the "mudsill" theory that a viable society is divided into two groups, one exercising superior functions, and the other exercising inferior ones. If the "mudsill" theory was not new in the South, it had never been more cogently expressed than by Hammond. No pro-slavery argument ever uttered in Congress received more attention, particularly from Northern critics.

Pro-slavery advocate John H. Van Evrie, a reputable physician of Washington D.C., viewed the Negro as belonging to a lower order of man. Van Evrie's belief that the Negroes constituted a different species from the Whites led him to support the "plurality" theory of the origin of
mankind which asserted that early man did not originate in a single centre of creation.

Thus were the arguments justifying slavery. These arguments made on religious, scientific, moral and rational grounds were, by and large, deliberate attempts for keeping the lucrative institution of slavery intact and unaffected by any probable sympathetic attitudes.

**Christian Attitude to Slavery**

That Christianity had a vehement religious interest in enslaving the Africans and backing up the institution of slavery in America has by now been convincingly proved. The coastal states of West Africa, from where the natives were captured and shipped to the new world, were mostly in the influence of Islam and under the Muslim kings. And these areas had been naturally the targets of the Christian missionaries. They were bent on winning these Muslim states of Africa for Christ. This ambition was only strengthened by the fall of the Moors in Spain. C. Eric Lincoln observes:

From 638, the Christian influence in Africa declined before the vast hegemony of Islam. In consequence, history was compelled to wait for Prince Henry the Navigator, that half English, half Portuguese Grand Master of the order of Christ, to open up the so called dark continent for Christ and commerce, and to see the slave trade established in medieval Europe fifty years before Columbus would discover a new Europe, where slavery was to become the major instrument
of economic and social aggrandisement for almost three centuries. (Race... 27)

History reveals that Portuguese Christianity was not alone in introducing slavery to Europe. Under Enrique III of Castile, gold and slaves from Africa were marketed in Seville in the last decades of the fifteenth century. Queen Isabella, the canny and daring patron of Columbus, however, sought to end this practice before it was well rooted. But her attempts were all unsuccessful because the prevailing sentiment of the Church was in favour of slavery. The view of the Church was that it was better for a heathen to have his body bound and his soul free, than vice versa. No wonder the Spanish crown could issue an edict in 1501 permitting not only freshly caught Africans but those born in Christianity as well to be sold in America. These Christianized Blacks were even used for converting the Indians.

The Catholics were a step ahead of the Protestants in their zeal to Christianize the Africans through the institution of slavery. The Catholic missionary saw no sin in enslaving them. Besides, they regarded slave trade as a beneficent agency to bring black barbarians into Christian civilization. Commenting on the Catholic attitude C. Eric Lincoln writes:

...a bow toward Rome and on with the business at hand, being careful only to have no dealing with the heathen Mohammedan lest the poor souls, already damned being black, be damned again for falling into the ways of Islam. (Race... 29)

The Protestants, however, found justification for slavery more in
racism than in religion. They were not as zealous as the Catholics in Christianizing the black Africans.

As made clear above, the missionary interests of Christianity were highlighted for justifying the enslaving of the Africans. Later on, in the American soil, long after the black slaves were baptized, the same doctrines and arguments of Christianity were being put to use to justify the continuing practice of slavery. C. Eric Lincoln throws further light on the matter: "But Christianity in America had already been accommodated to black pacification and control in the interest of the most abominable institution ever to challenge Christian morality" (Race... 34).

What the Church taught the black slave was to this effect: He must not complain, for all that he was or ever would be depended upon his white master. It was God's will! To run away would be to commit an unforgivable sin - the theft of his master's God-given property, viz., himself! To kill himself would be to destroy property not his own. A slave who committed suicide could receive no rites of the Church, and was destined to burn in hell forever. But if he bore his lot with love and patience, being at all time loyal and obedient to the masters set over him in this world, he would be properly rewarded in the world to come. It was God's will and it was the white man's burden to see that will fulfilled. The addresses made to them by the Church, in the words of Gilbert Osofsky in his The Burden of Race, were as follows:

Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters..., with fear and trembling... as unto Christ... Remember, God required this of you ... There is something so becoming and engaging in the modest, cheerful, good-natured behaviour
that a little work done in that manner seems better done... It also gains the good-will and love of those you belong to ...

Besides, ... your murmuring and grumbling is against God who hath placed you in their service. (40)

In short, Christianity offered one of the mainstays for the continuation of slavery in America. It was of lasting impact too because it had a psychological and spiritual effect on the victims of slavery.

In spite of all these, there were certain great men at all stages, who, inspired by their humanitarian sympathies and commitment to truth, observed this evil institution critically and opposed it vehemently in public. Prominent among them were the agriculturist Frederick Law Olmstead, the English writer Miss Harriet Martineau, and the French political writer Alexis De Tocqueville, all of whom wielded their pen bringing to light the pathetic and utterly miserable conditions of the black people in slavery.

The House slave and the Field Slave

Concerned about the predicament of the Africans in slavery, one cannot fail to notice that all slaves in America were not in the same deplorable conditions. There were varying degrees of sufferings in the case of slaves in different roles. All of them did not share the same lot; some were better off than others. City slaves might mix with free Negroes and might share in the excitements of urban life, thus leading a freer and more interesting life than slaves in a rural setting. And on the plantations all bondmen were not alike. They were described distinctly as house slaves and field slaves with regard to their duties. A domestic slave living
in the big house would have been most unwilling to change places with a field hand living along the slave row because of the wide disparities in the conditions of the two classes of slaves.

Of these two classes of slaves, the house slaves who were more closely in touch with the civilized life were comparatively in comfortable conditions and they later on transformed themselves into a Negro middle class. The field slaves who were destined to bear the brunt of the system in all its intensity suffered a lot and were denied access to the elevating experiences of civilization. This class of slaves, constituting the majority of the Negro community, was subjected to a high degree of cultural and moral degeneration.

**Denial of Basic Rights**

Apart from being subjected to the inhuman and dehumanizing conditions of slavery, the African slaves in America were generally denied many of their basic rights in life. They were not allowed to marry the person of their choice, nor were allowed to lead a family life, and the "family of convenience" they had, was often broken up by forced separation of the members. The slaves were further denied the right to learn reading and writing and any form of education. Teaching Negroes how to read and write was made unlawful. They didn't get opportunities for self-expression, and had to suppress their feelings. None of the comforts and benefits of civilized life was meant to be enjoyed by the Negro slaves. Because of all these and because of being traded like mere commodities, the Africans in America were to undergo a dehumanizing experience, and in spite of their rich heritage, they, in the course of time,
degenerated culturally and morally. No wonder, they soon became unfit for many of the tasks that civilized men usually take.

**More Hardships and Further Struggles**

As conditions of life became worse in the early decades of the nineteenth century, there broke out massive and violent retaliations and resistance in several parts of America. In 1811 a group of Louisiana slaves rebelled in two parishes near New Orleans. In 1822 Denmark Vesey organized a revolt in and around Charleston, South Carolina, that included thousands of Blacks. As early as 1800, in Henrico county, Virginia, Gabriel Prosser and Jack Bowler organized an insurgency involving over one thousand slaves who marched on Richmond, more than six hundred white militia men sought them out, and, in the end, thirty five Blacks were executed. In perhaps the most famous resistance movement of this time Nat Turner and his followers in 1831 killed more than sixty Whites in Southampton County, Virginia, before state and federal troops turned the tide.

Such rebellions and armed confrontations, in most cases, were suppressed brutally and the black people were always to lose. But if active, armed battles were doomed to failure, other measures were open to them _ notably escape through the Underground Railroad. Fostered by the Abolitionist Movement, which grew steadily after 1815, a network of sympathetic "operators" sprang up to aid those Blacks who fled organized slavery. According to Leslie H. Fishel, Jr. and Benjamin Quarles, more than 100,000 slaves migrated north along the clandestine route of the Underground Railroad during the years between 1810 and 1850. This
furthered the tension between North and South which coupled with the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 as president led to the fierce civil war. The devastation of the Southern states—physically and culturally—in the war apparently weakened the institution of slavery in those states.

**Emancipation Proclamation**

By 1860 when Abraham Lincoln was elected president, the Abolitionist Movement, spearheaded by both Whites and Blacks, had become powerful. The course and conditions of the civil war, which started soon, too necessitated the federal government to consider the question of emancipating the slaves in the South. Fishel and Quarles note: 

As the war dragged on into the middle of its second year and the death toll rose sharply, there was a growing sentiment in the North to free the slaves of the enemy. With enlistment dwindling and manpower needs becoming more acute, the slaves of the enemy represented a source of strength both as military labourers and as soldiers. (432)

Pressed by such military requirements during the civil war, and instigated by several leaders and media-men in the North, Abraham Lincoln issued a preliminary proclamation warning the states in rebellion that if they did not lay down their arms by January 1, 1863, their slaves would be declared free.

As Confederacy ignored the ultimatum, the president issued the Final Emancipation Proclamation on the appointed day. In addition to declaring the freedom of rebel-owned slaves, it asked the former bondmen to abstain from violence, to labour faithfully, and invited them
to join the armed forces.

The emancipation proclamation lacked the glamour and brilliance of a historically important act of nobility on several grounds. It was necessitated by the military requirements of the white man's government. The slave-owners were not prepared to forfeit their valuable possession and, besides, it was only a formal declaration with little willingness to consider the Blacks as equals. Yet it brought a formal end to the three hundred years-old institution of slavery.

The post-civil war reconstruction of the devastated South gave great hopes to the Blacks. They even got say in the political processes. For the first time they participated in the legal process, sitting in state legislatures and enacting laws. In Georgia, in Louisiana, in Alabama, in South Carolina, in Florida: throughout the South, Blacks were elected to state governments as representatives, as senators, and even as lieutenant governors. But such political gains and hopes for economic amelioration were short-lived. For the Whites were not prepared to put up with such fortunes of the former slaves.

**Cry for White Supremacy**

The former white slave-owners of the South were not prepared to approve of the measures taken for the improvement of the conditions of the ex-slaves' life. They reacted violently. Wayne Charles Miller observes:

> As early as 1866 groups of Southern Whites harassed both Blacks and Northern Whites by forming vigilante groups, White protection societies, known variously as Regulators,
Jayhawkers, and the Black Horse Cavalry. In the late 1860's and through the 1870's they were joined by groups such as the Knights of the White Comelia, the White Brotherhood, the Council of Safety, the '76 Association, the Constitutional Union Guards, the White League of Louisiana, the White Line of Mississippi, the Rifle Club of South Carolina, and finally the knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Their objective was to once again establish "White supremacy" in the South, and they would use violence — even wholesale murder — to accomplish that objective. (5)

As a result of the activities of these white supremacists, the Blacks, by 1910, for all intents and purposes, had lost the right to vote throughout the South. In subsequent years laws such as the "Jim Crow" law imposing restraints on the Blacks and denying their rights as citizens were enacted. In 1933, when the Supreme Court outlawed the 1875 Civil Rights Act, the Blacks in the South found themselves legally separated from Whites in almost all areas of their life, and Whites enforced such segregation in the courts by law and in the streets and countryside by violence and terror.

**Free, but not Equal: Blacks Look for a Way**

In short, the life of the Blacks in the southern states, even after the proclamation of emancipation, was characterized by racial discrimination, segregation in social life and widespread insecurity. Constitutionally they were citizens of America entitled to get equal rights and privileges. But in practice they were discriminated against everywhere. In educational
institutions, in job opportunities, in politics, in Church and other religious institutions, they were treated as second-rate citizens - men with inalienable inferiority. Besides, the frequent and fierce race riots and white-harassment had made life impossible for them in the United States.

No wonder, in the face of such organized cruelties and atrocious attitudes, the black Americans looked for options. Some prominent individuals among the Blacks in America and certain movements and organizations deserve attention in this regard. Among these prominent figures were Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois and Martin Luther King Jr. They were men who tried to improve the conditions of the Negroes in their own different ways. Their names have been indelibly marked in the annals of the Negro revival in America.

The Niagara Movement, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Urban League, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Civil Rights Movement etc. are among the important movements and organizations that represented the sentiments and problems of the Negroes in the post-emancipation period.

Booker T. Washington offered advice that seems naively tailor-made to the era of the rise of industrial giants. He urged his fellow Blacks, in his autobiography and elsewhere, to learn agricultural and industrial skills and to emulate the puritan habits of thrift, good moral behaviour, and perseverance; in his view Blacks had to develop a base of skilled craftsman in a complicated agrarian and industrial nation before they could aspire to more lucrative goals, and dedicated the Tuskegee Institute to that end. During the years 1895 to 1915 Washington became
the most powerful and influential Black in the United States.

But W. E. B. DuBois put greater emphasis on the need for getting respectability for the Blacks. In 1903 he published his *Souls of Black Folk*, a book that contained severe criticism of Washington's position, and an historically and sociologically based argument in favour of broader education for Blacks and for meaningful resistance to the Jim Crow legislation which had robbed them of their political rights and their potential economic power. Although the era was best symbolized by the figure of Booker T. Washington, the arguments of DuBois, in retrospect, seem more valid. North as well as South, there was the increasing awareness among Blacks that they needed to organize in order to fight for their rights. DuBois, with the help of William Monroe Trotter, formed in 1905 a significant protest organization called the Niagra Movement. Meeting for the first time near Niagra Falls, New York, close to the spot where Henry Highland Garnet had called for a slave revolt and a general strike in 1843, the groups issued a proclamation calling for an end to all race discriminations. In the following year, at their first annual meeting, they demanded for Blacks the political, social and civil rights enjoyed by white Americans.

The NAACP that came into existence in 1909 was an organization that sprang from the Niagra Movement. With DuBois as its director of publicity and research, the organization quickly launched a campaign against lynching and brutality, called for protection within the law for Southern Blacks, and sought to broaden economic opportunities for Blacks across the country. The launching of a magazine, *The Crisis*, the first important national publication to provide a voice for black
Americans, was a great achievement of the NAACP.

The National Urban League that was formed in 1911 for helping the Blacks in the nation's major cities, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Non-violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC), with their militant character were some other organizations that enjoyed popular support in their struggle against discrimination. The race riots triggered by the atrocities unleashed on the blacks by the white supremacists in the first two decades of this century accelerated the activities of such movements.

The non-violent resistance championed by Martin Luther King Jr. was another significant experiment in the revival of the Afro-Americans in the post-emancipation era. The Montgomery bus boycott initiated by Martin Luther King Jr. was an action that has come to symbolize the concentrated effort to bring meaningful change in American social structure through organized passive resistance.

The formation of black Churches, necessitated by the segregatory and discriminatory attitudes of the white Churches was another of their responses to the hostile conditions in life. Although the black Churches came into existence as early as 1778, it assumed significant roles only after the abolition of slavery. In fact, from the time of the establishment of black Baptist Churches during the American Revolution they had often comprised the one institution that the Blacks could call their own. It gave the Blacks a chance to be together among themselves, and to think seriously about their predicament. These Churches were, as C.Eric Lincoln suggests, "the black man's government, his social club, his secret order, his espionage system, his political party and his impetus to
freedom and revolution" (Race... 72).

The black Churches undoubtedly played a historic role in their life during this period. Wayne Charles Miller remarks:

From their inception they encouraged education and as early as the Vesey rebellion in 1822, were accused by Whites of fostering Black discontent with their role in the system. At least, the Churches became focal points for organization and resistance, and it is no accident that many of the Black Civil Rights leaders of modern times—from Martin Luther King to Adam Clayton Powell—came out of ministerial backgrounds. The Churches, among all their other functions provided useful bases of power from which to operate, particularly in a country that claimed to be predominantly Christian. (5)

These organizations and movements, however, operated within a framework highly circumscribed by the white American society. They naturally were not capable of obtaining for the black people a sense of dignity, self-respect and awareness about their rich heritage which were badly needed for them to be psychologically prepared for a revival in the true sense. The obvious reasons were that they were concerned only about the history of the Negro since his arrival in America, and that their minds were conditioned by the white-Christian concepts and ideas, being ignorant of their past before their arrival in America. And therefore even those Negroes in comparatively better conditions, being psychologically deprived, lived with a strong sense of inferiority in everything about them. In such circumstances, it was only natural for the black intellectuals
to seriously enquire about their past and search for a dignified and valuable heritage.

The attempts of an average middle class Negro, for a long period now, were for getting assimilated to the Whites in all walks of life. These attempts, often very awkward and clumsy, were unsuccessful too because the Whites were not prepared to accept him as one among them or treat him as equal. C.Eric Lincoln sarcastically remarks: "For the white man 'a darky' was a darky, no matter who his daddy was " (Race... 76).

Thus even after a long period since abolition, the ex-slaves continued to be in a big crisis, a crisis of misadjustments and loss of identity. The search for their true identity and the enquiry into their real history stemmed from this background. The movements of black nationalism that came into being in the middle decades of this century were the outcome of this search and enquiry.