Chapter – I

INTRODUCTION

The worth and essence of human beings are well testified and established by predicaments of life. Human life is purely an intellectual and logical coexistence. The more one undergoes the predicaments, the more one understands the life and its meaning. Life without predicament would be dull and monotonous like a rose without fragrance. Predicaments are chances to enrich and beautify the life and its purpose. There are several kinds of predicaments in a man’s life cycle, they are personal predicaments where one has to convince himself and change his attitudes. Social predicaments make men obliged to the society and act in cognizance with it. Spiritual and moral predicaments make a human committed to the welfare of the fellow human being rather than improving his personal gains. Political predicament is where the problems of society and human are to be addressed. In the history of America, blacks were never considered as rational. Like every rich nation, it had adequate wealth, manpower, and everything, but the blacks were at the receiving end who shared poverty, misery and pain which made them to revolt against the oppressive forces and reveal the reality of exploitation.

The United States of America is the pet child of history. In a comparatively short period, the United States has made tremendous advances in material production. Today, it is an industrially progressed country with huge cities, high sky scrappers amid hi-tech infrastructure, excellent roads and high-yielding farms. Robert Ivanov comments that “The Americans are the only great nation in the world history to be formed by the mass immigration of millions of people.” (Ivanov, Robert, 7)

In its history of less than two centuries, the United States has produced sufficient literature to merit attention. It is a distinctive literature worthy to take its place with the great
literature in the modern times. It could be said that it is the only nation of the New World to have developed an independent literature with original thoughts.

As a land of opportunity and land of hope, America is a great nation in the history of nations emerged as a new civilization four hundred years ago. During the early history of America, it was colonies of different European countries, more of British, went in search of a new land, and settled in the eastern coast of today’s United States. Hence, the history of literary tradition is linked to the broader tradition of English literature. The American literature as a whole can be considered as a written literature evolved in the parts of United States and its earlier colonies. It is a new nation and a continent with newer ideologies, ready to be explored and experienced.

During the last few decades, United States experienced a highly fruitful literary period. Several prominent writers took the centre stage with their creations, the writings of Saul Bellow, J.D.Salinger, Sam Shepard, John Updlike, Arthur Miller, Norman Mauler, Kate Chopin, Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison and some others became part of the modern literature and recognized for their realistic approach by looking beyond the British narratives. It shaped and reflected the broader American literature.

Language is an authentic tool for expressing ideas, thoughts and imagination. Literature elaborates the wellness of the cultural maturity or social dimensions of a period. In this concept, literature is a life-line for bringing the truth in a more refined and fictional manner for the generations to learn. Thus, literature is inter-related socially and from the writer’s point of view, which explores the man, his culture and the social experiences. In supportive of this, Robert E. Spiller writes,

"Literature is any writing in which aesthetic, emotional or intellectual values are made articulate by excellent expression. . . . Literary history conceives of
literature in the modern times. It could be said that it is the only nation of the New World to purpose of study, and determined by forces and factors both within and without the individual and collective experience of the writers who lived in that time and place. (Spiller, Robert .E, 15)

American literature from its conception brought out the social situation and social identity which has fallen under several reviews and criticisms. However, initially, the literary works of America were in resemblance to the life and period of European literature, hence it followed the characterizations of the Europe and the English literature. Critics and scholars felt that America should find a path for itself and establish in the literary world. Thus, Fred Lewis Pattee, the then Professor of American Literature at Pennsylvania State University, who was long regarded as the ‘first professor of American Literature’ reviewed in the pages of American Mercury, “. . . it is high time, I believe, for a history of American Literature to be written.”(Pattee, Fred Lewis, 134)

American literature may be said to have made its humble beginning in 1493, when Columbus wrote his famous letters to King Ferdinand of Spain. Other explorers and adventures, who followed, also wrote letters to their friends and relatives at home, and such communications sent to their near and dears in Europe, known as ‘letters home’ marked the beginning of the written record of the American life.

A typical American literature is not the one that merely describes the geographical features of the new continent, nor is it one that focuses attention on the problems encountered by the settlers. Neither the historical events nor the religious beliefs of the Americans constitute American literature. It evolved with a specific and unique feature as an accumulation of facts, Puritan tradition, romanticism and realism.
American literature can be regarded as the literary pieces that highlight the American mind. The writers gave a new shape and color to American imagination and their creative works dealt with the American voices and their original expressions, and their language expressed the simpleton. It documented the medieval mindset in the American background.

It was in the 1620s the Pilgrim Fathers, the European immigrants settled on the American soil. The settlers inhabiting a new land, breathing new air, watching strange scenes and experiencing thrill and excitement encountered several problems. They looked back with nostalgia to the rich culture of Europe. The chief problem of American literature was that of delivering satisfactory literary forms from this new civilization. It is an acknowledged fact that American literature is “a transplanted European culture,” (Bala, Suman, 11) bringing with it the richness of its sources in the classical world, the middle ages and the Renaissance. The ideals and values developed in democratic society greatly influenced the American writing. On the uniqueness and development of American literature, Suman Bala comments that “. . . it will indeed be wrong to agree with the traditional critics who think that American literature is and always will be a branch of English literature.” (Bala, Suman, 11)

After two centuries of literary development, in the twentieth century, the American writers produced great classics of their own emerging culture, which was not of the immigrant but different from the Europeans. American literature derives from both an imported culture and also the circumstances of a new world radically different human experiences from the old, because, “America was a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created free and equal” as quoted by Abraham Lincoln.

Some of the early American literatures were pamphlets and writings extolling the benefits of the colonies to both the European and colonist readers. Captain John Smith could be considered as the first American author with his works: A True Relation of Such Occurrences
and Accidents of Noate as Hath Happened in Virginia... (1608) and The Generall Histoire of Virginia, New England and the Summer Isles (1624).

While compared to the present day style of literature, American literature is now, more than ever, a market-driven literature, rather than an art form patronized and promoted by cultured whites and blacks as it had been in the past. In the late 1960s on the progression of American literary history, Sujit Mukherjee observed that, “American literary history has developed a genre and also attained an excellence which has few parallels outside that country.” (Mukherjee, Sujit, 317)

American writings began with the work of English adventures and colonists in the New World chiefly for the benefit of readers in the mother country. The first work published in the Puritan colonies was the Bay Psalm Book; this humble and well-worn hymnal was printed in 1640 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Away from the religious activities, the approach of the American Revolution and the actual independence of the United States marked a time of intellectual activity as well as social and economic changes. The variously gifted Benjamin Franklin was the pioneer in elevating the American literature to a newer platform through his writings, and also founded and promoted newspapers and periodicals.

From the European point of view, the American literature was an off-shoot of English literature; hence recognition of its standard and equal treatment was still wanting. However, with the tremendous efforts and literary exposure it received a coveted position by the achievements of two men from New York, the prominent being, Washington Irving who first won the attention by presenting ‘American Folk Stories,’ and secondly, James Fenimore Cooper, who wrote enduring tales of adventure on the frontier and at sea. These works made a mark and informed the arrival of American literature.
The famous poems and songs such as “Yankee Doodle” and “Nathan Hale” were popular during the revolution. In the post-war era, Thomas Jefferson held an important place as one of the most talented early American writers, with his influence on the United States Constitution. His autobiography, *Notes on the State of Virginia* and his many letters are of literary value. However, much of the literature of the new nation struggled to find a unique American voice in existing literary genre, and this tendency was also reflected in his novels.

It was between 1696 and 1700 the New England colonies started to break away its cord with England and it was perhaps one of the most important reasons for establishing the individuality of the American culture and its identity. The identity and the cultural change were well portrayed by the French immigrant Michel Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur, naturalized in New York as John Hector St. John (1735-1813). In 1782, he published his narrative essays called the “Letters from an American Farmer” and that became the first literary success by an American author in Europe and projected him a celebrity. It became an eighteenth-century cultural masterpiece. The book was a collection of semi-autobiographical writings in epistolary form that describe the daily life along with the northern frontier during the days up to the American Revolution. In his work, he brought out many American English terms to the Europeans. In this elaborative masterpiece, he explored the concept of the American dream and portrayed the American society as characterized by principles of equal opportunity and self-determination.

His narratives made the readers to learn in depth the “New World” and its creation. It further opened a broader understanding of the American identity. They provided the essence of Americanness by signifiCantley describing it as an entire country rather than another regional colony. His writing complimented the American ingenuity and its life style. It was considered as a break through as it threw light about the life in the American colony and the emergence of
an American society. The Europeans appreciated his works and identified him as, James the
“American Farmer” and held him in high esteem.

Having opened up the gates of American wisdom, the last Eighteenth century and the
early Nineteenth century saw the arrival of first novels. The novel of William Hill Brown, The
Power of Sympathy made a great impression in literary front and was considered as the first
American novel. The subsequent decades brought more writers; prominent women joined the
fray in literary eloquence. A novel written by Susanna Rowson called Charlotte — a tool of truth
was first published in London in 1791. However, the same novel was republished in 1794 in
Philadelphia with a new title Charlotte Temple which earned the reputation as the best seller of
the nineteenth century before Harriet Beecher Stove’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, which stirred a great
debate. When the novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin, was released in 1852, it angered many white
Southerners. William G. Allan declared in a letter to editor of Frederick Douglas’ Paper, a black
abolitionist periodical: “What a book! It is, in its line, the wonder of wonders. How its
descriptions stir the blood, indeed almost make it leap out of the heart!” mentions Elizabeth
Ammons. (Ammons, Elizabeth, 4)

The American Renaissance really is the significant starting point of a distinct American
Literature. With the war of 1812 and an increasing desire to produce uniquely American
literature and culture, a number of key new literary figures emerged, like Washington Irving,
who is well known as an essayist, biographer and historian of the early nineteenth century. His
contributions are well acclaimed for his short stories, “Rip Van Winkle” and the “The Legend of
Sleepy Hollow”. Along with James Fennimore Cooper, he encouraged American authors like
Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Edgar Allan Poe to
bring a broader dimension to the literary quest. They wrote about the American lives and
American history, a commoner’s survival with a distinct American identity, a history different
from England. Irving was often considered as the first writer to develop a unique American style of description and writing. Sashi Deshpande reviews that,

\[ \ldots \text{since American literature started from scratch after its independence, a very interesting theory was put forward in an essay by a feminist critic Nina Baym (in The New Feminist Criticism) that, early American critics felt, having liberated themselves from England, they could not have British literature as the standard of excellence for American writing. They therefore decided on “Americanness” as a standard, which became part of the American tradition.” (Deshpande, Sashi, Online Edition “The Hindu” n.p.) \]

Yet another kind of people that must not be omitted is the Negro or black people from Africa, who were shipped over at first as slaves to work on the cotton and sugar plantations in the southern states. They have become a part of the American Nation after Abraham Lincoln abolished slavery. While the other migrants and colonies of the erstwhile Europe adopted the language and the culture of the new nation, the black people adopted the language but did not assimilate themselves into the culture so easily because the Africanness and the separate culture of their own made them claim their roots in Africa. They brought newness into the Modern American literature, giving them a unique identity called the Black Literature.

Despite having lived a down-graded status in the American history, Negroes played an important role in American life, history and culture long before 1619. The folklore and spiritual phrases were considered as the arts and culture of the Blacks and became part of the New American culture. Clarke pointed out,

\[ \text{In the United States, the art and literature of the Negro people has had an economic origin. Much that is original in black American folklore, or} \]
singular in “Negro spirituals” and blues, can be traced to the economic institution of slavery and its influence upon the Negro’s soul. (Clarke, John Henrik, 219)

The black literatures were the depiction of the life of the Negroes after their arrival in the new land. These earlier narratives mirrored slavery to modern day works bringing out the lingering effects of slavery, racism and apartheid. The black writers contributed to some of the most spirited and important works in the American Literature. Ralph Ellison, the contemporary of Richard Wright and famous black writer perceived, “. . . the Negro people came to this country from Africa and not from Europe. . . that they came in chains and were consequently uprooted from their cultural and family moorings.” (Ellison, Ralph, 37)

The Negro was not brought to the new land to be given democracy. When the promise of democracy was made, in the American soil, it was not made for them. Robert Ivanov has critically observed,

The United States is a country of sharp social contrasts. In the world’s richest country, thirty five million people, according to official data, live in the brink of poverty. A large part of them are colored citizens and among these unfortunates and especially large number are black Americans. The super exploitation of this population group has always been the source of enormous profits of the United States ruling classes. (Ivanov, Robert, 12)

He further laments the tragic journey of the Negroes to the American continent. Their arrival was marked with pain and agony, not only being uprooted from their fatherland but also separated from their families. Whilst the slaves were still being transported to the new continent, during the Eighteenth century, the Negroes did attempt to explore their skill and find a place for
themselves in writing and publishing the works of poetry. Notable among them were Jupiter Hammon and Phillis Wheatley who could be considered as the prominent slave writers. Jupiter Hammon was the slave of the rich Lloyd family of one Henry Lloyd. Consequently, Hammon is still looked on as the first American Negro to have had a poem printed. Jean Wagner says, the poetry was in line with the African folklore, “An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries” in the year 1760 composed very close in tone to folk poetry. He further adds that Hammon’s another poem, addressed to Phillis Wheatley, appeared eighteen years later, called “A Dialogue, Entitled, the Kind Master and Dutyful Servant” bears no date. (Wagner, Jean, 17) His most remarkable work, An Address to Negroes of New York was published in the year 1787. Jupiter Hammon created a land mark and a new beginning for the blacks and opened the gate way into the literary world for the blacks.

Ralph Ellison attributes that the African American literature is the writings of people of African genre shifted to America: He opines,

In broad terms, African American literature can be defined as writings by people of African descent living in the United States. African American literature has generally focused on the role of African Americans with in the larger American society and what it means to be an American.

(Ellison, Ralph, 37)

In the absence of the social network and cultural set up on their own in the new soil, a country where they had to adopt themselves, African American literature explored the issues relating to freedom and equality long denied to blacks with further themes on African American culture, racism, religious slavery, and rootlessness.

Deprived of education, the Blacks in America did not possess any literary back ground therefore; each writer had a different style and gave newer expressions to his views. Although it
was not unique, their theme and approach were the same in dealing with suppression, alienation, fear and insecurity. There was no common mode of writing for them, but it carried a strong sense of freedom. At the same time, there were different experiences and means which earned appreciation for its literary values. However, the works focused with a strong sense of racial pride and a desire for social and political equality. John Henrik Clarke explains that; “Throughout the early part of the nineteenth century, the slave narrative became a new form of American literary expressions” (Clarke, John Henrik, 60). Further elaborating his views, he says, “The out come of black literature is the out come of African heritage and the psycho sociological and economic front of Blacks in America – particularly slavery and segregation” (Clarke, John Henrik, 57).

The arrivals of writings of the slaves were thus known as the “Black Literature” and the slaves became an integral part of African American literature. During the early period, many blacks from North America and the Caribbean wrote accounts of their lives; about one hundred and fifty of the writings got published into separate books or pamphlets. Notable writer Langston Hughes, who was by profession an African American lawyer, a social reformer and author, was appreciated for his works in racial themes and in 1928, he was awarded the NAACP’s ‘Spingarn Medal’ for his pioneer work as a literary artist depicting the life and struggle of Americans of Negro descent. In a more determined fashion Charles W. Chesnutt an another renowned writer, wrote why Langston Hughes intended to write,

I think I must write a book. I am almost afraid to undertake a book so early and with so little experience in composition. But it has been a cherished dream, and I feel an influence that I cannot resist calling me to the task. . . . The object of my writing would not be so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites . . . for I consider the
unjust spirit of caste which is so insidious as to pervade a whole nation, and so powerful as to subject a whole race and all connected with it to scorn and social ostracism . . . I consider this a barrier to the moral progress of the American people: and I would be one of the first to head a determined, organized crusade against it. (Chesnutt, Charles W. *Journal* 1880)

In an immaculate manner of his own way, Langston Hughes opens his seminal essay 1926, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”, as a critique of a young Black poet of the time, he says, “One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, ‘I want to be a poet – not a Negro poet,’ meaning, I believe, ‘I want to write like a white poet’; meaning subconsciously, ‘I would like to be a white poet’, meaning behind that, ‘I would like to be white’” (Hughes, Langston 27). Thus Hughes’ power of invective is unmistakable, to be an American in 1926 is to be white, and to ignore one’s “Negro” identity in favor of an assimilated American one is to ignore oneself.

The next major work written by a slave was a *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* which was published in 1845, brought a reality of a slave’s life. At that time some critics attacked the book, not believing that a black man could have written such an eloquent work. Despite this, the book was an immediate best seller. While, Fredrick Douglas first came to the public attention as an orator and as the author of his ‘autobiographical slave narrative,’ he eventually became the most prominent African American of his times and one of the most influential lecturers and authors in American society.

The writings from a generation of blacks gave a different dimension to the growing American literature to mature and develop. In the middle of the Nineteenth century, this genre mainly concentrated on the slave narrative accounts written by the fugitive slaves about their
lives. With literary and educational opportunities increasing for blacks, the demand among the readers for black writers had grown by the turn of the century. Among the most notable writers was W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the original founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) published a collection of essays titled, “The Souls of Black Folk”, wherein he states,

It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels, his twoness - an American, a Negro: two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Bois Du W.E.B. 12)

As Afro-American creative writers, they contributed a lot to the interpretation of the new Negro literary moments and African-American literature in general. Apart from W.E.B. Du Bois, there were two more men, James Weldon Johnson and Alain Locke, who cast a guiding influence over this literary movement without becoming a part of the social climbing and pseudo-intellectual aspect of it. By continuously challenging the old concepts and misinterpretations of Afro-American life, Du Bois, gave enlightened new directions to a whole generation. As an editor of The Crisis, he introduced many new black writers and extended his helping hand when it was needed.

The history of African American literature reveals a consistent two fold development. While the writers honed their literary skills, most of them used their written skills in addition to their talent at oration to improve the quality of life of Black Americans. The increasing literary production improved their life from slavery to reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance through
World War I and II. Unfortunately, change of life led to social maladies such as, crowded prisons, gang violence, sub-standard public education and drug addiction.

In the United States, the art and literature of the Negro people has had an economic origin. Much of that is original in black American folklore, can be traced to the economic institution of slavery and its influence upon the Negro’s soul. The initial predicament of a slave narrative came from the pen of Gustavus Vassa or Olaudah Equiano, an African from Nigeria. It was a period of ‘great pamphleteering’ in the United States and the narratives of Gustavus Vassa created a commendable interest on lives of slaves. Commenting on the life of Gustavus Vassa, the African, Daniel Correa states,

The free Africans in the North and those who had escaped from slavery in the South made their mark upon this time and awakened the conscience of the nation. The lack of formal education gave their narratives a strong and rough-hewed truth, more arresting than scholarly. Gustavus Vassa established his reputation with an autobiography, first printed in England. Vassa, born in 1745, was kidnapped by slavers when he was eleven years old and taken to America. He was placed in service on a plantation in Virginia. Eventually, he was able to purchase his freedom. He left the United States, made his home in England and became active in the British anti-slavery movements. In 1790, he presented a petition to Parliament to abolish the slave trade. His autobiography, ‘The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Gustavus Vassa’, was an immediate success and had to be published in five editions. (Correa, Daniel)

The remarkable contribution of blacks to the American literature happened by the writings of poetry from Phillis Wheatley and after the Revolution, ‘The Slave Narrative’, the
first influential slave autobiography of Olaudh Equiano. His writings created a wave among slaves to express themselves. The writings of Equiano provided a platform for a genre of writers to follow him and bring out their feelings.

In *The Negro in Literature and Art* published in the Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science in September, 1913, W.E.B. Du Bois rightly identified Equiano as the founder of the African American Slave narratives. Equiano classified himself among the “citizen of the world”, an appropriate designation of the men and women of African descent who embraced trans-national identities when national identities were denied to the Negroses (blacks) during the 18th century. After the abolition of slavery, and the end of American civil war, a number of African American authors continued to write non-fiction works about the predicaments of African Americans in the country.

The cultural upheaval and literary revolution received a facelift in the 1920s. This period was considered as the golden era for the Afro-American writers. The renaissance gave the much needed boost and moral support for the creative artists of various disciplines. As it was concentrated on New York City’s Harlem, it was known as the Harlem Renaissance. It was also called as the New Negro Renaissance movement for the New Negro. It revived various fields like art, literature and politics etc. It was considered a dream land as it was more prosperous, liberal and industrialized when compared with the white dominated South. The Southerners started migrating in large numbers to North particularly to Harlem to escape from slavery and bondage. Although no specific period could be attributed for the emergence of Harlem Renaissance, during the period of First World War around 1915-1918 it emerged and by the year 1920 it reached its peak, however, as it erupted, by 1930 it ceased to exist. Interestingly, Harlem Renaissance was referred to a period of remarkable creativity in literature, music, dance, painting and sculpture by African-Americans. The distinguished writers who were part of their
movement were Langston Hughes, Countee Culler, Steling Brown, Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, and Jessie Fauset. Etc. Unfortunately, the Great Depression of 1929 brought the era of Harlem Culture to an end.

The developments and happenings of the Harlem Renaissance are worth recalling. In the 1920s black writers and artists in Harlem lived blooming with new movement in literature, theatre and music. Some of the notable achievements were, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* in 1922 edited by James Weldon Johnson, which had a remarkable collections of some of the period’s most talented poets including Claude McKay, and the most recognized writer of the Renaissance Langston Hughes published his collection of poetry “The Weary Blues” in 1926, and a novel, *Not Without Laughter*, in 1930.

In this cultural emancipation, the black women did not lag behind and they too contributed to the literary works of African American in the Renaissance era. The popularly known Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was published in the Thirties and Dorothy West published *The Living is Easy* – a novel detailing an upper-class black family during World War I.

The Renaissance paved the way for the black writers to hold on their creativity in subsequent decades. With the significant contribution from the black authors and theatre artists encouraged another literary growth of the trinity of particularly the notable writers. Of them, novelist Richard Wright published an unflinching condemnation of racism in *Native Son*, and his contemporary Ralph Ellison brought to the readers an inside view of the world of an ordinary black in *Invisible Man*; and James Baldwin, the friend of Richard Wright, produced *Notes of a Native Son* – a direct response to Wright’s book, a non-fiction book and Baldwin’s first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, reflected upon his life in Harlem as the son of a Baptist minister.
The Renaissance not only influenced the American black writers, artists and intellectuals but also French speaking black writers from African and Caribbean countries and they joined this band wagon of cultural movement. James Weldon Johnson pronounced it as ‘flowering of Negro literature.’ As it bloomed, the movement withered due to the stock market collapse in 1929, which resulted in the financial dry up, thereby marked the beginning of the depression and the end of the period known as the “The Negro Renaissance.”

Although Harlem Renaissance gave a much needed leverage for the Negro emancipation, the emergence of the Blacks and their participation in the world of literature, art and culture started much before. Despite several draw backs because of the social malady and differential attitude as a lesser human by the whites, the Blacks have taken tremendous efforts to become a part of the intellectual society. There were several turning points which proved their strength and prowess. Every step that they took forward was to be a milestone and a significant path breaking event as every incident turned a new page and rewrote the history for the Blacks who were brought from the Africa in chains as slaves.

The incidence of 1901 turned a new leaf and brought them into the limelight, on 16th October 1901, Booker T. Washington who had done much to help advance many African Americans, was invited by the President Theodore Roosevelt for a dinner. This event was considered as significant because, it was a time when the blacks were systematically excluded from the vote and political participation. Although the event created a harsh criticism and furor over the dinner, an African American being entertained at the White House for the first time revealed the structure’s symbolic power and the bigotry then at large in the nation.

The next formative event occurred was in 1909. The creation of NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) was a historic movement. Its mission was to ensure the political, educational, social and economic equality of right of all persons and to
eliminate racial hatred and racial discrimination. The association was formed on the direct result of lynching in 1908, of two blacks in Springfield, Illinois.

The spring of 1916 saw the beginning of the Great Migration. Over four millions left in the two years period from 1916 to 1918. The migration was a watershed event in the history of African Americans. Several analysis has been suggested on this movement.

This followed with the great literary awakening in the American history, the Harlem Renaissance. Alain Locke commented it as a ‘spiritual coming of age’, whereas Langton Hughes expressed, it as the ‘expression of our individual dark skinned selves.’ The intervening years between the Renaissance and the emergence of Richard Wright was filled with writings of genuine black writers like Ralph Ellison, Henry B.Jones Marian Minus, Ted Poston, Lawrence D. Reddick and Grace W.Thompkins published their first works.

A mass upheaval attracted the world’s awareness with the arrest of Ms.Rosa Parks’ leading to a thirteen month long protest by the blacks known as the ‘Montgomery Bus Boycott’, on the 1st December 1955 sparked a big social dissent which ended with the US Supreme Court ruling that segregation on public buses as unconstitutional. This event gave more impetus for their demand for self respect and bringing an end to their struggle for civil rights. It was a non-violent protest which challenged the racial segregation. Martin Luther King Jr.’s role in the bus boycott garnered international attention.

The next major event was the enactment of racial discrimination in public places. The Civil Rights Act was mooted by John F.Kennedy in 1960 and was made in law in 1964 by President Lyndon Johnson. The new Civil Rights Act paved the way for equal employment opportunities, eliminated the social discrimination based on color, race and national origin in swimming pools, libraries and public schools, theatres, restaurants and hotels.
Unfortunately, the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968 was the big blow to the blacks in America. He had dedicated himself for the cause of blacks’ upliftment and followed the path of non-violence, inspired by the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi. The King’s murder sparked street protests and massive wave of riots across the country.

The 70s and 80s saw the social acceptance of blacks in the main stream and was dominated by writers like Toni Morrison who was famous for being both a woman and an African-American. Her book Beloved won the ‘Pulitzer Prize’ in 1988; and in 1993 she was awarded the coveted ‘Nobel Prize for Literature’. Her novels are known for their racist themes, lively dialogues, and elaborative human predicaments.

The wheel of black history in the American continent came to a full circle with the richest reward that could be considered as the social acceptance, which is publicly established at present by the election of Barack Hussain Obama as the President of United States of America. This achievement can be considered as a major leap for the Blacks as whole to have gained acceptance and achieved the equal status, for which people like Martin Luther King were longed for. Obama is the first African American to hold the Office of President of the United States when he was sworn in January 2009. The struggle of their fore fathers, the racial disparity, social discrimination and unknown and untold sufferings at last bore the fruit of acceptance and recognition of the black’s struggle.

The recurring themes on the works of African American writers can be summed up in the words of VanSpanckeren;

The search for identity, anger against discrimination, and sense of living an invisible, hunted underground life unacknowledged by the white majority, have recurred in the works of such 20th century black American
authors as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison. (VanSpanckeren, Kathryn, 46)

Richard Wright himself confesses that, “There are meanings in my books in which, I was not aware until they literally spilled out upon the paper . . . I said to myself: I must write this novel, not only for others to read, but to free myself from this sense of shame and fear”. (How Bigger was Born, 868)

Richard Nathaniel Wright belonged to a generation of American artists whose work and political views were profoundly influenced by the experience of the Great Depression and the human predicaments of the working-class battles of that era. Wright’s novels and essays create a deep dent into the heart of the racist society in unflinching and powerful language. In his autobiography, Black Boy, he describes his reaction to the novels of the German author H.L. Mencken which also holds good to Wright’s creations,

I was jarred and shocked by the style, the clear and clean, sweeping sentences. Why did he write like that? And how did one write like that? I pictured the man as a raging demon, slashing with his pen, consumed with hate . . . yes, this man was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club . . . I read on and what amazed me was not what he, said but how on earth anybody had the courage to say.’ (BB, 237)

Srinivasan. C, in his comparative study on “Social Disjunctions in Richard Wright’s novels and Jayakanthan’s Sila Nerangalil Sila Manithargal” highlighted that as a writer Richard Wright is responsible for making the Negro ‘visible’. (Srinivasan .C. 70) He further states that Richard Wright was a black man first and secondly a writer. The life of this black man is interwoven and inextricably bound by his writing. He posed a new challenge to African-
American writers asking them “shall negro writing be for the negro masses, molding the lives and consciousness of those masses towards new goals, or shall it continue begging the question of the Negroes’ humanity?” (Srinivasan .C. 70) and awakens the consciousness of blacks about their rights.

The life and works of Richard Wright can be divided into five periods. His early childhood and adolescence spread over a period of nineteen years in the White dominated South. Ten years of self-awareness time in Chicago, where the circumstances turned him to become a revolutionary and leaned towards communists ideologies, which etched him into a professional writer. The third stage was his successful career as a writer for ten years in New York. The later stage of life for ten years, he spent in Paris and finally the last tragic two to three years of self-isolation.

Richard Wright was born in a poor family who had a great potential for genius but survived under the gallows of racially divided and poverty-ridden southland. During his childhood he suffered great trauma. Margaret Walker portrays this in more detail;

In addition to the pain of racially, class, and caste prejudice, and violent white racism, he seethed inwardly with anger against these indignities, cruel and inhuman circumstances. This anger or rage drove him to create and to achieve. The wellsprings of his creativity were deep welters and dark pools of realistic and neurotic anger, which he sublimated into imaginative writing. His tortured consciousness bespoke an even more tumultuous unconscious, out of which his daemonic genius spoke.

(Walker, Margaret, 4, 5)

The childhood of Richard Wright was in turmoil. Nathaniel, father of Richard Wright was an illiterate mill worker and a sharecropper who abandoned the family. Wright’s mother
had to seek for several employments, like teacher, and cook to support the family. He grew up in poverty often staying at the relative’s place. He had schooling for just few months but could not pursue his education due to his mother’s poor health. Then again he attended the school infrequently. However, he worked hard to educate himself and he was always attracted towards books and borrowed secretly from the whites-only library in Memphis. Drawn towards self-education, Wright took odd jobs like delivery boy, worked as an assistant to an insurance agent. When he turned fifteen, he tried his hands at writing and his first story, “The Voodoo of Hell’s Half-Acre,” was published in the Southern Register. Thereafter, he attended the junior high school in Jackson, Mississippi and graduated in 1925. Speaking about his rebellious attitude and fierce writing, Jerry W. Ward and Robert Butter, focus on his brought up in his childhood and the adolescence period.

Wright’s violent rebellion against his Aunt Addie and the religious school she operated had a very positive immediate effect. It convinced his grandmother to abandon her attempts to impose a religious education on him and to go along with his desire to attend two secular schools, Jim Hill Public School and Smith Robertson Junior High School. It was at these schools that Wright became excited about education and saw his reading and writing as both a lifeline and a doorway to a liberating new life. For the first time, Wright could experience four years of continuous formal education, something which released him from the “prison” (Wright, 143) of his environment, “revitalized (his) being” and opened the way to a “future” (Wright, 147) of new possibilities.” (Ward, Jerry Washington & Butter, Robert, 40)
Wright’s writing is distinctive in nature and belongs to a style of southern Gothicism, American naturalism, Afro-American humanism, and World realism. However, on the social front his expressions were profound on his culture and it included the humanistic touch longing for freedom and social justice in free society. Margaret Walker supports this idea and states that,

Nearly every piece of fiction he wrote ended tragically and almost always involved grisly murders. His imagination was Gothic; and his vision was tragic. . . Further, Wright inherited a proud black tradition that he could not escape in literature from ancient Africa, the Afro-American humanistic tradition includes a search for freedom, truth, beauty, peace, human dignity, and most of all, for social justice. (Walker, Margaret, 7)

The fictional work of Richard Wright is an outcome of two different periods. However, there is a thread of continuity which co-relates his literary foresight. This foresight is the outcome of the dominance of his personality, primarily, of his racial experience and a helpless reaction to a hostile world which pushes to destruction, and secondly, his stubbornness as a fighter for freedom in an alienated and exploitative world.

He adopted a realistic approach in his writing. He portrayed a black man as an average, subhuman, neglected by the society, uncared and segregated and separated by race, class and caste. He defined and co-related his characters in his novels with the day to day happening during his life. In a more realistic fashion, Wright contemplated himself as a character in his epic novels, Native Son and Black Boy. His works are of phenomenal achievement that gave the groundbreaking realistic view of a life of a Black, combining with his upbringing. Even today his works are marveled for the relevance of time and life. Being a self-educated and liberal minded personality, naturally he was attracted towards the philosophies of Communism which
gave him the more needed food for his thoughts. As was normal among the black Americans, he was attracted by the Marxist-Leninist ideologies. He supported the theory of international brotherhood and unity. He believed in the Communist ideology of ‘Workers of the World, Unite!’ Among the writers of his period, he was considered a persona of great power and great passion, commended for his strong sensibility and intellectual genius.

His works notably, “Native Son, Black Boy, and How Bigger Was Born” won world fame and name. His widely acclaimed other publications include,

*Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938); *Native Son* (1940); *How Bigger Was Born* (1940); *The Negro and Parkway Community House* (1941); *Native Son, play* (1941); *The Man Who Lived Underground* (1942-44); *Black Boy* (1945); *The God That Failed* (1950); *Native Son, screenplay* (1951); *The Outsider* (1953); *Savage Holiday* (1954); *Black Power* (1954); *The Color Curtain* (1956); *Pagan Spain* (1957); *White Man, Listen!* (1957); *The Long Dream* (1958); *Daddy Goodness* (1959); *Eight Men* (1961); *Lawd Today* (1963); *Letters to Joe C. brown* (1968); *What the Negro Wants* (1972); *Farthing Fortunes* (1976); and *American Hunger* (1977)

A number of Wright’s works have been published posthumously. Some of Wright’s more shocking passages dealing with race, sex and politics were cut or omitted before original publication. In 1991, unexpurgated versions of *Native Son, Black Boy*, and his other works were published. In addition, his novella *Rite of Passage* was published in 1994 for the first time. Upon his publications and works, Hicks throws more light on the period when they were released,

Although Richard Wright has published eleven books over a period of exactly twenty years, *The Long Dream*, is only his third novel. His first

(Hicks, Granville, 323)

Richard’s journey into the American literature was well received and appreciated in general. However there were mixed responses on his works; *Native Son* was reviewed as a powerful novel that exposed the social injustice and it became an instant best-seller in 1940. It was commended as a first of its kind for a black author in America.

The period of Wright’s works were basically influenced by the events and calamity of the Great Depression and the economic battle confronted by the middle-class America. His novels and essays were highly influenced by the provocative racist society and he condemned them by his powerful language and articulation. While receiving appreciation from one quarter, not all critics in the black community held the same opinion. The Pittsburgh Courier’s George S. Schuyler wrote, “Wright is effective in his indictment of America’s slave pen. But in his zeal to show the Negro’s resentment, he is guilty of gross exaggerations, and thus tends to perpetuate the stereotype Negro so long used by Negrophobes to frighten white America.” Lillian Johnson of The Baltimore Afro-American shared similar sentiments, saying, “We need writers like Mr. Wright. We don’t need books like ‘Native Son.’” (www.proquest.com)

Remarkably, Wright’s literary treatment of nationalism remains avant-garde since he reveals a complex insight into the deep psychology of nationalism. Like many contemporary theorists, Wright viewed nationalism as an historical phenomenon that constructs what Benedict Anderson has termed “imagined communities” for people who in fact are anonymous to each other but wish for social communion. Wright also perceived nationalism as a divisive political ideology that must be supplant with a Communist ideology, necessary for the emancipation of
the working class. For Wright, the danger posed by nationalism was its unconscious appeal to the psyche of male workers.

Richard pictured the emotion of powerlessness and how it evoked a feeling of depression. This sense of depression in black men became more intensified, since they were over-oppressed due to racism. With a Communist ideology to back his views, Wright conveys his concern that black working-class men are apt to heed the call of black nationalists. He urged the Negro writers to abandon the posture of humility and the bourgeois path of “individual achievement” and to develop a collective voice of social consciousness of both nationalist and Marxist. He began his serious writing in New Masses, the Daily Worker, Anvil and other left wing periodicals. As Russell Carl points out, “One thought pervaded all of Wright’s work – that the perennial human failing – man’s gross inhumanity to man – had to be abolished” (Carl Russell, xii). His societal thoughts bore more of Marxists approach which ultimately reflected in his novels, as Margaret Walker describes, “He became a political animal with a social perspective and Marxist philosophy.” (Walker, Margaret, 54)

If words could be used as weapon, the best attribution should be given to Richard Wright. His tone was powerful and went down to the complexity of the life of the Black. He brought out the expressions of a black in a more direct way rather than fictionalizing. “. . . Wright’s story becomes an epitome of the incommensurability of aesthetics and politics that troubled much other fiction of the 1930s”, comments, John T. Matthews. (Matthews. John.T, xvi).

His themes had the political implications with society and economy interlinked. He went on to add life, love and death, at times in a tragic way, giving a phenomenal mix up to put across his point of view. He reached the masses in a manner to kindle the human tendencies in the black society, as Eldridge Cleaver, puts it,
Of all American novels, and indeed of all American novels of any hue, Richard Wright’s reigns supreme for his profound political, economic and social reference. Wright had the ability like Dreiser, of harnessing the gigantic; over whelming, environmental forces and focusing them, with pinpoint sharpness, on individuals and their acts as they are caught up in the whirlwind of the savage, anarchistic sweep of life, love, death, and hate, pain, hope, pleasure, and despair across the face of the nation and the world . . . Wright’s force, it seems to me, was reflecting the intricate mechanisms of a social organization, its functioning as unit. (Cleaver, Eldridge, 108-109)

A study of Richard Wright would be incomplete without the mention of his friend and critic James Baldwin. He referred to Wright as the “the greatest black writer in the world” (en.wikipedia.org). Both Wright and Baldwin dealt relentlessly with White Racism and the destructiveness of such racism on blacks. Wright depicted blacks as almost the inevitable victims of white dominance while Baldwin portrayed the blacks with great power and that whites were losing a power, they never had and projected they had. Although Wright and Baldwin fell apart at a later time, Baldwin explained, “I knew Richard and I loved him. I was not attacking him; I was trying to clarify something for myself.” (newworldencyclopedia.org)

The issues like the search for identity, anger against discrimination and sense of living and the underground life unacknowledged by the white majority have recurred in the works of Richard Wright. Unfortunately, racism has been a part of American and world history for centuries. This present study on the works of Richard Wright argues and elaborates that blacks do have the power, a great power, and usher a new era of equality in the present generation, but ironically, they went through a bewildering and demoralizing era in the American history.
This study proposes a review on the racial abuse, alienation, exploitation of blacks as victims of insecurity, from the days of slavery. The study also analyses the identity factors and the fight for equal status of the Afro-Americans for a prolonged period under different circumstances which they gained from the prejudiced white society. The novels and writings of Richard Wright, a pioneer among the black writers, have been selected to fulfill this research. It has explored various novels of Wright; his contemporaries and supportive materials of historical values to prove the malady gone through by the African Americans from the time of their arrival to the New Land. The study is undertaken based on the literature reviews of various print materials and net sources mainly on the American literature and other classics. Concentration has been paid to substantiate the works of Richard Wright and other notable writers by bringing out the predicaments of the African-Americans in America.

The objective of the study is to define the forms of racism which paved the way for alienation, identity crisis, suppression and exploitation of a disadvantaged community brought forcefully from another continent. It also attempts to substantiate and analyze the circumstances that have led the author to bring out the ill-effects through his protagonists.

The select novels of Richard Wright for this dissertation namely, *Native Son* (1940), *Black Boy* (1945), *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938), *Eight Men* (1961), *Laud Today* (1963) and *Long Dream* (1958) bring out the stigma of societal unevenness. The chosen themes in this research are endorsed with the immense sequences available in his narratives. The study has been undertaken with the sociological and humanistic perspective from the writings of Wright.

The research work is divided into six chapters namely, Introduction; Alienation; Identity Crisis; Oppression and Suppression of Black People; Exploitation and Insecurity and Conclusion. The chapters Alienation and Identity Crisis reflect on the predicaments of the blacks, their way of life and their place in the society, which Richard saw, experienced and
recounted. It also explains the views of the author through his protagonists. His views on Alienation and Identity Crisis go hand in hand in explaining how the blacks are cornered in the society, despite the modern prosperity of the country.

Interestingly the philosophy of Martin Luther King Jr, who followed the preaching of non-violence of Mahatma Gandhi, prompted and encouraged to take up a research on the struggle for equal status by the Afro-Americans in the white dominated American society and to analyze the contributions of African-American writers. The works of Richard Wright were considered as a path breaker. He brought out the harsh truth through his novel, *Native Son*. Though a debut novel, it brought not only name, fame and popularity to Wright but also became a corner stone in the history and evolution of Blacks in the United States.

Chapter I begins with the introduction to literature and the growth of American literature. It deliberates on the evolution of African-American literature and its contribution to the world literature. References have been quoted from the narratives of early Black Writers like Phillis Wheatley, Olaudh Equiano, Frederick Douglass and connecting the works of Richard Wright and his contemporaries. The study has focused on the significance of Harlem Renaissance, also called the ‘Negro Renaissance’ and the break through it provided for the prominence of black writers. A brief effort has been made to describe the life of Richard Wright and his achievements. Finally in this chapter a chronological sequence of important milestones in the history of African-Americans are traced and it ends with the reference of methodology, approach adopted for the study and the further scope of the study.

Chapter II, titled “Alienation”, makes a critical approach to stress the brutality of alienation and gives an interpretation of the assault of the dominant whites over the blacks. The degradation has left the Blacks with no choice but to revolt against the white racial stereotypes. The other triumphing approach of Wright was his revelation of the vulnerability of the assaults
carried out on the down trodden in America by the dominant whites. He reasons that whites perceived the blacks as culturally, linguistically and intellectually inferior to them.

The blacks were denied the social interaction with the whites; the blacks talked and behaved as whites’ expected, otherwise they would be punished or even put to death. At the same time blacks were forbidden to talk like white, to learn, to read and write. Thus it was a social domination and if the blacks do not follow the diktats, they were driven to taste the consequences. The societal realization has led to a greater reform in the society. The Afro-Americans have successfully confronted alienation facing several road blocks and achieved considerable milestones. Literary works such as Wright and other black writers have given immense strength to the cause. Richard critically approached to defeat the factor called alienation. He projected racial prejudice as the reason for alienation, and symptom of a materialistic social impact. The idea of the white man’s racial supremacy was rooted deep in the social system and it could be corrected only by changing the society.

Chapter III, under the title “Identity Crisis”, analyses on the social and economic approach on the lives of blacks from the days of slavery and an in depth study has been undertaken particularly from the works of Richard Wright. The American history has greater responsibility in explaining the myriad problems of Blacks. Underlying the criticality of Identity, the Afro-Americans expressed their dream for self-realization, self-consciousness. They wanted to be considered as equals among the humans. Every black writer has projected on this theme to establish their opinion and Wright has brought out the Identity factor in a sarcastic manner in his works. From ‘Black’ being ‘Ugly’ it is now twisted as ‘Black beauty’. This phenomenal change could be attributed to ever tiring efforts of personalities like Richard Wright.
Richard portrays his characters with a dream to attain identity in the society. It highlights family scenario, life in South and the survival in North, and depicts more about the Communism and the effect it has taken the lives of Blacks.

Chapter IV covers on “Oppression and Suppression of Black People”. The ill effect of Racism has driven the Blacks to corner where they are crushed till they succumb to the pressures of the dominant society in the United States. The chapter displays the pain and anguish gone through by the African American in their struggle for survival. In the era of discrimination and disparity against blacks, racial inequality silenced many black writers. Their works were sidelined and being branded as unimportant and inferior. Adding fuel to fire, the white men showed no remorse for forcing the blacks into slavery. This chapter explored the shackle of boundaries on blackness and Wright’s approach in liberating the blacks from this negative interpretation.

Richard Wright has attempted in a forthright manner to bring out the tragic sense of life. Wright has exposed the racial problems and registered his voice of protest through *Native Son*, *Black Boy*, *Long Dream*, and *Eight Men*. Not to be left behind, but to kindle a sense of awareness among the blacks, he has advocated them to revive the Black (Negro) culture and native (African) wisdom.

Chapter V highlights upon the “Exploitation and Insecurity” of Blacks. It discusses on the several methods of exploitation perpetuated by the whites on the blacks. The study further elaborates on the economical deprivation entangled with poverty and hunger which lead the blacks to be easily exploited. The calamity imbibed a sense of insecurity. The research has helped in finding out how the theme of racism and violence portray this fear. The impact of poverty is well explained by Richard Wright in *Native Son* and in his short stories *Eight Men*. Taking domestic issues and hardships, Richard opens up the scenario of absurdity of life where his characters attempt to attach themselves to the meaning of life. SignifiCantley, Richard
himself experienced the adversity of poverty and insecurity due to the deprivation of the right of equal job opportunity or an affordable accommodation, food and other basic amenities in his early stage of life. Thus, hurt by the reality of poverty he questions the reason for going hungry and why could not they eat, when they are hungry. Insecurity, particularly in the work front is illustrated by Richard. This study brings out a good number of details on the job discrimination faced by Blacks aided by the narratives of Wright.

Finally, the Chapter VI “Conclusion” recollects all the discussions on the various issues dealt with in the foregoing chapters precisely in a dove-tail fashion. It recapitulates on the characters of Richard Wright which derive a sense of pride as they break the dominant hegemony and stand tall for being ‘Black.’ It elaborated on the man to man relationship and the reaction of the society. A deeper sense of belongingness is projected in the works when he supports the reaction of his protagonists. He has handled a critical subject at a time when the works of blacks were not considered favorably. As a self-made man he has established himself among the stalwarts of American literature.

The African-Americans never stopped their protest to be treated as humans and they have successfully made their impact felt in the society. They have acclaimed international reputation too. The American society is now open and there is an equal distribution of resources and wealth. It is the need of the hour to recognize the ideology and writings of Richard Wright to bring forth the sacrifices of African-Americans. Richard was applauded as the natural writer and true to this appreciation his works brought out the reality of life and psychology of the society. This study has been undertaken through sociological and humanistic approach to substantiate the predicaments of the blacks in the white dominant American Society as represented by Richard Wright. The study attempts to establish the truth that American Literature would be incomplete without the mention of Wright and his works.