CHAPTER THREE

“RACE STIGMA”, 1900-1950s

The opening of the twentieth century found the African Americans in a limbo—unable to go forward with their rehabilitation as promised by the events of the last quarter century. Their place in the South, where a majority of them lived, was still governed by the Jim Crow laws. Reminiscent of the black Codes of the antebellum era, they ensured the continuation of the earlier segregation of the society on the basis of colour. In 1893, in Plessy vs. Ferguson, the Supreme Court had also given its blessings to this segregation, enjoining only that the facilities extended to the two communities be equal. It was a glib subversion of the basic principles of justice to entrust the equality of the African Americans to a group which had not thirty years back opposed it through armed insurrection.

Even in the North, the Negro ceased to be an object of widespread social debate or contention. A kind of fatigue seemed to settle over the issue of race. In the event, the community faced three principle challenges: economic survival, formation of a new identity and breaching the white-only walls of Americanism to claim equality with other Americans. In the first half of the century, as the nation busied itself with two world wars, a catastrophic economic depression and European affairs, it was left to the leaders of the community to work out strategies and priorities of facing the challenges of their situation.
The quiet acceptance of the Plesssey judgement indicated the change in the national mood since the Civil War had been fought. The broad ranging sympathy for the community and the effective consensus over Abolition were giving way to public fatigue with the issue. The fatigue came about because the nation was emotionally exhausted by the value-conflict involved in issues related to the status and destiny of freedmen. The proponents of Abolition had been able to bring it about because the President had already decided to go to war to save the Union. He had made it clear that his objective was to save the United States as it then existed rather than to abolish slavery. Midway through the war he was persuaded to add Abolition to the Union agenda. Lincoln could, of course, have been moved by the constant arguments of the anti-slavery groups, or he might have decided to use Abolition only as a tool to discomfit the rebel states, or he might have decided to end a major cause of national dissent in the past half century. Nationalist and visionary, he may have recognized in the slavery issue a potential force for the Union's destruction. However, once the war was over he moved quickly to end the animus.

His second inaugural address has often drawn notice as a rare statement pleading to heal the national breach and get on with the cause of reconstruction. ¹ This, however, presented the

¹ See the editor's commentary on the second inaugural address of President Lincoln in William Raymond Smith, The Rhetoric of American Politics: A Study of Documents (Westport, CT, Greenwood, 1969), pp. 258-66. Smith interprets the address as a means to "...prevent the normal consequences of military victory....He does not contradict his audience's attitude toward slavery or the South; [but] he forcefully reminds it of a theory of providence that all more or less accept...[wherein] success or failure...depends not upon human exertion but upon divine will...". (p. 265) It set the mood for national reconciliation but in the end that mood was also responsible for the
nation with hobson's choice. The South had been defeated in war but not in ideology. A majority of the white people clung tightly to their ideas about the Negro as being inherently inferior to the whites. The exaggerated notions of honour, typical of the region, demanded courage in the face of adversity. This courage took the form of submitting to the rule, but not the ideas, of the victors. In fact, their very defeat reinforced a sense of loyalty to the lost cause for which their compatriots had sacrificed their lives. Even under normal circumstances, the slave as the weakest and the most vulnerable member of society was likely to draw the wrath of whites, unable to assert themselves in other spheres in life. The process was intensified by the strange, and by southern notions outrageous, situation when the African Americans turned out to be the only ones who could claim a victory in the triumph of Union arms. The inability of the whites to effect a change in the situation intensified their antagonism. The nation had therefore to choose between the two communities. The South of the whites would not be reconciled to the Union in emotional terms so long as the Union backed the cause of the African Americans. The question did not present itself in such black and white terms rather each issue involved making this implied choice over and over again. In the end, by slow degrees, the choice fell in favour

relegation of African Americans to the back of the national consciousness.

2 This had been anticipated by President Lincoln who wrote to General Benjamin F. Butler in April 1865: "But what shall we do with the Negroes after they are free? I can hardly believe that the South and North can live in peace unless we get rid of the Negroes". Quoted in Theodore Draper, *The Rediscovery of Black Nationalism* (New York, 1970), p. 5.
of whites and by the time the new century opened the Blacks had been abandoned to their fate.

The tragedy of their situation was acute due to the very war which had freed them. Under slavery at least their most basic needs had been provided for, though in a primitive fashion and at a great cost. But under the new dispensation they had to fend for themselves in a society whose hostility to their race had been crystallized and sharpened by the Civil War and the Reconstruction. Most of them, as agricultural labour, had skills only in that field. They were not equipped to take advantage of the industrialization of the South ushered in by the war. As a result they had to go back to the old masters in many cases and take up work on conditions as bad as before. Only the names and techniques of racial subordination changed but not its reality.

Racism in the United States at this time found an unexpected ally in the form of the emergent Modernism. Though there is no consensus amongst scholars as to the precise meaning of the term "modernism", most are generally agreed that it was the dominant mode of expression and opinion at the beginning of the twentieth century. Some names also find almost mandatory reference in any discussion of the movement and the discourse it created. Modernism, at the beginning of the

3 By the beginning of the twentieth century white Reaction was ascendant with the quiet complicity of the North. The white politicians who came to power in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, found "legal" means checking the exercise of political power by the African Americans. For example, between 1896 and 1904, the number of black men registered to vote was "legally" reduced from 130,334 to 1,342 while the nation watched. Obviously national priorities had changed since Reconstruction. See, George Cotkin, Reluctant Modernism: American Thought and Culture, 1880-1900 (New York, Twayne Publishers, 1992), p. 67.
twentieth century, expressed itself at the level of popular culture through booming “self-help” movements.4 Such movements, as stated earlier, exhorted individuals to take exclusively personal responsibility for solving their problems. Steven Starker makes a distinction between the self-help literature of this period and the religious and moral treatises on personal improvement published in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The new literature was secular and stressed the application of rational science to solve personal problems. Typical of these was the rags-to-riches success story of Horatio Alger. Starker cites the advice of the mid-nineteenth century McGuffey Reader to “try, try again” as an example of the kind of texts priming society for a new industrial world where individual persistence and disciplined hard work were at a premium.5 By the turn of the century, this “discourse” had constituted a “new sense of self, exhorted to create one’s own success and blamed personally for failure”.6

The African American community responded to such restricting of life choices in a variety of ways. The first fifty years of the century saw an intellectual ferment which threw up broadly three approaches to deal with the emergent situation. The first of these was represented by Booker T. Washington.

4 Before going further with this discussion, it should be noted that the term “modernism”, specially due to the spotlight thrown upon it by post-modernist discourse, denotes a variety of meanings. As Houston A. Baker, Jr., has rightly said, “Promising a wealth of meaning, it [modernism] locks observers into a questioning indecision that can end in unctuous chiasmus”. Houston A. Baker, Jr., Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance (Chicago, 1987), p. 1.
ACCEPTANCE OF THE AMERICAN TRADITION

By the last decade of the nineteenth century, Washington had finally worked out a philosophy and course of action for his beleaguered people. Through the famous speech of 1897 in Atlanta, he signalled his willingness to adopt a pragmatic approach. Basically, the approach consisted of the recognition that the national consensus on ignoring the cause of Blacks was strong and pervasive; that the traditional stress in American culture on individualism and the ascendant philosophy of self-help necessitated that the community work for its own uplift; that the "progress" of the community would be measured in terms of wealth-creation and "rational" achievements. Washington was also aware of the legacy of slavery that had created a vast gulf in the material and emotional states of his people and the rest of society. His approach was designed to close this gap with the minimum of contention and without dividing the energies of his people amongst different goals.

He, therefore, propagated the doctrine of self-help for the coloured people who were exhorted to rise in society through industry and hard work. Towards this end, Washington set up the Tuskegee Institute. At the Institute, members of the community were trained in, what were considered, "industrial" arts. They included brick-laying, masonry, carpentry and such other crafts. Washington also accepted segregation, advocated a quiet and law-abiding way of life and an avoidance of any kind of intellectualism which may alarm the whites. His attitude pleased the southern whites for he seemed to be a black who evidently understood his "place" and was content to remain
there. The Northerners appreciated his message of peace because only a quiet South could ensure the industrial expansion they were then engaged in. The northern industrialists were also hopeful that trained African Americans would provide a useful labour force for the industries. The tremendous eminence of Booker T. Washington was due to this very understanding of the empirical and intellectual reality of the times and the ability to fall in line with it.

Washington, however, it seems was simply following the methods of the black preachers of old. He taught an acceptance of and an acquiescence in the existing system because he saw no way of overthrowing it immediately. But his disenchantment with the system seems clear from the fact that he was quietly financing some of the earliest court cases against segregation.

But the training which was imparted at Tuskgee was not really of an industrial kind. Moreover, the dearth of capital and strong racial prejudice combined to keep the African Americans out of any jobs or enterprises that had even a semblance of respectability about them. Washington had either not reckoned with the "caste" status of the Blacks, as Gunnar Myrdal has called it, or saw no way to remove the obstacles which it placed in the social rise of even the trained and educated African Americans. The image and identity of the community that he aimed at was very much within the American tradition. It

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7 The caste system as described by Myrdal aptly sums up the position of the Blacks at this juncture. He wrote:

When we say that Negroes form a lower caste in America, we mean that they are subject to certain disabilities solely because they are "Negroes" in the rigid American definition and not because they are poor and ill-educated.
stressed rise through hard work, accommodation of majority feelings and following the path traced by most ethnic minorities upon first reaching America—prejudice and persecution followed by acceptance through material success.

Yet another attempt to work within the tradition appeared in the form of the “Harlem Renaissance”—an intellectual and artistic movement in the African American community in the 1920s and the 1930s. The Renaissance appealed to the tradition of meritocracy expecting to cross the racial barrier through talent. The authors of this Renaissance included Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Alain Locke amongst others. The architects of the movement concentrated their energies not on economic well being of the community but on its cultural accomplishments. In the ten years or so during which the movement was in full bloom a number of plays, novels and works of art and social criticism were created to express the artistic sensibilities of the African American community. Washington had focussed on the uplift of the community as such, probably in the pattern of the mainstream American middle-class dominant society. But the Harlem Renaissance went the way of another American tendency of rise through exceptionalism. It was the movement of the “talented tenth” of the community rather than of the whole community as such. As one of its proponents, Langston Hughes, suggested, the Renaissance had less to do with “ordinary Negroes” and was confined to, what Walt Thurman called the “niggerati”. The intellectuals involved with the movement wrote in a typically

black voice, assertive of their racial identity. Some took on this pronounced "Black" persona by writing in the "Negro dialect" while others wrote extensively about Africa as the place of their origin.

The Harlem Renaissance has generally been declared a failure by scholars. Nathan Huggins, in his *Harlem Renaissance*, has blamed the failure on the inability of the concerned artists to claim their *patria* or nativity. He feels chagrined that the authors of the Renaissance allowed themselves to be restricted to the province of "race" rather than rising above it and simply claiming the national heritage which has always been there for all Americans. They needed to liberate themselves from the arena of race to which their creativity had been restricted. That rising above the communitarian identity in racial terms to assert their individual selves would have been the triumph of modern African American intellectual prowess.⁸

The historian David Levering Lewis, on the other hand, finds the seeds of failure in the movement being too ambitious rather than too narrow or provincial. Lewis challenges the idea of a *patria* already in existence for the African Americans to claim. Through detailed research, he presents the conclusion that the Harlem Renaissance as a means of defining the New Negro revolved around art because that was the only area of American life where the colour line had not been drawn too clearly. Politics, economics, education were all fields where rigid segregation had ensured the banishment of the coloured persons. In such a scenario, according to Lewis, it was simple delusion for a handful of artists and intellectuals to try to

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integrate the destiny of millions of African Americans with those of the other Americans. As a result, the Renaissance failed to create the impact it had set out to achieve, both amongst the blacks and the whites. It did not change the fact that an African American, no matter how exceptionally talented, continued to face the insuperable wall of racialism in reaching out to the predominantly white audiences. His/her sensibilities were of value only when they fell into an accepted category of "Negro sensibilities". Anything wider than that— an attempt at portrayal of more universal feelings— was allowed to die quietly. As Paul Dunbar, one of the African American poets belonging to the movement, lamented, "I've got to write dialect poetry; it's the only way I can get them to listen to me".  


In Lewis's estimate, the Harlem Renaissance only went to prove the distance between the aspirations of the African American middle class and the masses since the former could be duped into attempting assimilationist patterns of race relations in the United States. The masses, on the other hand, more in touch with the ground realities vented their frustration through the Harlem riot of 1935.  

The idea of the Renaissance having been a failure has been challenged by Houston A. Baker, Jr.  

11 Baker refuses to isolate the Harlem Renaissance as something which can be studied as having a definite beginning and a clear end, which can be studied and judged a failure or success. Instead, in a


11 See, Baker, n. 4.
rather complex reading of African American strategies against oppression and tyranny in the twentieth century, he situates the Harlem movement as an instance in a discursive field that is the hallmark of the "modern" African American identity. Baker argues that the distinctive African American modernism consists in an effort to develop sounds that speak to the black lineage, that have "a family signature". The other element of modernism, "anxiety" or "angst" expresses itself in "the black spokesperson's necessary task of employing audible extant forms in ways that move clearly up, masterfully and resounding away from slavery". The fact that the African American modernism, unlike the modernism of others, was born out of conditions created by slavery rather than Victorian or Puritan repression gives it a necessarily different form and content. He traces the origins of this modernism back to Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*, reading strategies there for an explicit conflict where white resources had to be gently diverted to the uplift of blacks. Since in a racist society this could hardly be done explicitly, Washington developed a "mastery of form", using the device of the "Mask", in a subtle inversion of tradition, to serve black ends. With examples ranging up to the 1970s' prominent African American figures, Baker delineates the genealogy of an African American "sound", aimed at the survival and betterment of the community in a world of racism and segregation. Insofar as the Harlem Renaissance helped to create, through the Blues and Jazz to name only two expressions, this distinct African American sound expressive of African American history and identity, it was a success. Baker takes exception to the continuous stressing of the Movement as

a failure because it is judged by traditional Anglo-American standards of modernism. The fact that the Harlem Renaissance chose the field of Art was a compulsion created by its ancestry in slavery and not a function of segregation in the United States as Lewis suggests. During slavery days, “discourse was figured as ... hard won song and courageously expostulated black oratory (and written prose) designed to move the spirit of freedom”. The African American strategies of survival therefore are rooted in this very tradition of “sounds”--whether of resistance, or of failure or success. In this perspective, the Harlem Renaissance was a success and should be looked upon as so.

There seems to be some truth in both--the view presented by Lewis and that presented by Baker--the difference is in their perspectives. Baker views the Harlem Renaissance in terms of a special “Black” language of criticism. Aimed at creating an awareness of common heritage and destiny among the African Americans, it is a view from “inside” the community. Lewis, on the other hand, writes less personally, standing “outside” both black and white communities. Unlike Baker, Lewis is not interested in bolstering the self-image of African Americans, even though the former does so through a scholarly study and not mere propaganda. Lewis judges the movement against the ideals of the American Dream which is supposed to be the common denominator binding all Americans into a nation. The Dream may be defined as “the promise that all Americans have a reasonable chance to achieve success as they define it--material or otherwise--through their own efforts, and to attain

13 ibid.
virtue and fulfillment through success”. For Lewis, the Harlem Movement was a chapter in the efforts of the African American community to translate this promise into reality for themselves but the elite who led this movement failed to realize the restrictions imposed by race and so failed. For Baker, the Renaissance was merely one of the many strategies employed by the community to extract the fulfillment of at least some part of the Dream for the African Americans. It was successful insofar as it laid the ground for positive future developments.

Both findings underscore one fact: the predominant approach toward minorities in the United States till at least the 1970s was the assimilationist one prescribing the ideal of the melting pot. But all minorities upon first coming to America had to depend upon their “ethnic” or “cultural” networks to overcome the initial prejudice and find economic and emotional support. Blacks, bound together only by the negatives of slavery, poverty, segregation and a “caste” status, needed first to create an ethnic identity, a positive cultural persona and identity that could override the images, stereotypes and low esteem for “Black” colour in their own minds and in American historical tradition. The Renaissance was a building block in the process though its proponents may have had less communitarian goals.

14 Jennifer L. Hochschild, Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. xi. This may, however, be the reading of a non-American observer. As Jennifer L. Hochschild found in discussions over the manuscript of her book non-American auditors concurred that the United States has a coherent, widely recognized, mostly shared ideology, captured by the author’s definition of it. The Americans, on the other hand, had been “full of caveats and alternatives” (p. xii).
The efforts at creating such positive ties for the community outlived the Harlem Renaissance. But the later efforts were marked by growing bitterness towards white racism and black racial identity was often an assertion of separatism rather than an effort to follow in the footsteps of other minorities prior to assimilation. The bitterness was rooted in the low success of the approach of accommodation as reflected in the abject condition of most members of the community and continuing white racism regardless of the conciliatory approach of the African Americans.

POVERTY, RACISM AND FAILURE OF TRADITION

In 1900, only 10% of the African Americans were living in the North. Ninety per cent still lived in the South. However, the entrenchment of white supremacy coupled with senseless and recurrent violence against the community prompted many coloured freedmen to think of alternative places of residence and work. The agricultural depression of the second decade of the century provided the fillip to begin the great migration to the North. Between 1910 and 1920, the African American population of the North increased by 700,000. The migrants were mostly concentrated in the cities. Meanwhile, the community had responded patriotically to WWI. It volunteered 400,000 persons to serve in the Army. By the end of the war, however, most personnel were bitter and disillusioned. They had had to serve in segregated regiments and were forced to be content with largely non-combatant roles. Even the black soldiers whose valour was officially recognized by the French

government were subject to humiliations at home. Returning black soldiers were even made targets of race violence—perhaps to remind them of their place in society—and at least 10 such soldiers were lynched in 1919 itself. Yet these same soldiers had just been exposed to the war-time rhetoric of the Allies extolling democracy, equality, liberty and justice as causes worth dying for and as the very foundations of human civilization. The clear dichotomy between the facts and rhetoric was too much for many of them to accept.

Midway through the twentieth century, the status of the vast majority of black people was well below that of the middle class. More than 1 of every 2 black adults in 1940 had no more than 8 years of education, and 62% of working black men and women were employed either in agriculture or in menial personal service jobs. In 1944, Gunnar Myrdal wrote about the economic status of black Americans in following terms:

...the masses of American Negroes, in the rural South and in the segregated slum quarters in southern and northern cities, are destitute. They own little property: even their household goods are mostly inadequate and dilapidated. Their incomes are not only low but irregular. They thus live from day to day and have scant security for the future.

16 ibid.
Other observers had described the black social structure in the first half of the twentieth century as pyramidal in shape. The base was composed of a large lower class, the middle was made of a small middle class, while at the top was perched a tiny upper class. In contrast, the white social structure was classed as a diamond with a very large middle class and small lower and upper classes at the top and the bottom. The 1940 Census showed that 48% of white families were below federal poverty thresholds; the figure for black families was an astounding 87%.

Even for blacks with high levels of education, the opportunities for employment were restricted. They generally provided needed services to their own communities while being excluded from those which would have required closer contact with non-black peoples in society. As a consequence, 73% of all black college graduates between 1912 and 1938 became ministers and teachers. The black middle and upper classes even till 1960s were composed largely of small business owners and professionals like teachers, doctors, ministers and lawyers. This trend was a major factor in hindering the growth of a non-college-educated middle class, like that of whites in postal, fire or police departments. The educational differences between the black lower and middle classes in educational terms, therefore, remained wide. However, till the 1960s this difference was offset by the spatial proximity amongst all classes of the African American community due to racial segregation in housing. This situation gave rise to a strong sense of racial cohesion and pride.

amongst the blacks. In 1922, the Chicago Commission on Race Relations had found this phenomenon significant enough to deserve specific comment in their report. The situation continued to be the same till mid-1960s when some effective desegregation in housing took place. But even till the end of the century, the “ghettoization” of the community remained enough of a force to keep racial cohesion alive as a major aspect of African American life. The bitterness generated by such racial injustice conveyed to the ordinary black person that working within the assimilationist tradition would not be enough to improve their situation. Racist rhetoric proved irksome particularly in cities where concentration of African Americans in segregated sections gave them the sense of strength which the slave-owners had carefully avoided by isolating them in small groups as far as possible.

The gathering resentment provided the seedbed for a number of separatist movements. The most spectacular of these was the Back-to-Africa movement of Marcus Garvey. Garvey belonged originally to the West Indies and had come to the United States in 1916. He had a charismatic personality and a mesmerizing vision which attracted a number of the community to him. Garvey renounced all hopes of understanding from whites. The only solution, according to him, was for the African Americans to assert themselves against the whites and any other “race” which may choose to look down upon them. He advocated the return of the African Americans to Africa so they could live with dignity. To organize the community and help them return to Africa, Marcus Garvey set up an organization called the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). He

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20 Jaynes and Williams, eds., n. 17, pp. 164-65.
also launched a newspaper, *Negro World*, to take his message to the black masses. The actual membership of the UNIA was always disputed—while Garvey claimed millions, his detractors suggested thousands. However, he certainly had a large number of lay followers even if not registered members of UNIA. He was able to display his sway over the people through parades, colourful uniforms, and mass meetings. The UNIA had 700 branches in 37 states including in the South but his stronghold was the northern urban ghetto. He commanded support there through a mix of economic, religious and cultural nationalism that was to become a potent platform again in 1960s suggesting the long-lasting effect of both the causes which made the mixture work in the 1920s as well as Garvey's masterful grasp of them.\(^{21}\) He declaimed to his followers:

In view of the fact that the black man of Africa has contributed as much to the world as the white man of Europe, and the brown man and the yellow man of Asia, we of the Universal Negro Improvement Association demand that the white, yellow and brown races give to the black man his place in the civilization of the world.\(^{22}\)

His basic appeal lay in the pride and self-respect he could arouse in the continually derided African Americans:

...wheresoever the cause of humanity stands in need of assistance, there you will find the Negro ever ready to serve. He has done it from the time of Christ up to now. When the whole world

\(^{21}\) ibid., p. 253.

turned its back upon the Christ, the man who was said to be the Son of God; when the world cried out 'crucify him', when the world spurned Him and spat upon Him, it was a black man, Simon the Cyrenian, who took up the cross. Why? Because the cause of humanity appealed to him.\textsuperscript{23}

He defined the content of the black man's character in an entirely new way making him superior to all the rest. With his rhetoric Garvey combined a practical programme of self-help. He started co-operative enterprises of various kinds. His biggest and most stupendous venture, however, was Black Star Line which was meant to provide shipping services to the African Americans for returning to their homeland--Africa. Not only to his followers in United States but also to Africa, Garvey gave a grand history and instilled pride of ancestry in his people. He also took up negotiations with the League of Nations and the Republic of Liberia so that the African Americans could return to Africa, live with dignity under their own governments and earn the respect of other nations.

The movement reached its peak in 1920-21 and was strong in many parts of the country. Eventually, however, it failed to live up to its promise and collapsed. His businesses turned sour or involved him in legal tangles. The propaganda against him began to be effective as his practical remedies failed to solve the economic problems of his people. Finally, he was convicted for financial frauds and deported in 1927.

Although Garvey's movement was not the first to attempt a radically different delineation of African American history and culture, it was the first on a national scale. It evolved certain

\textsuperscript{23} ibid., p. 108.
methods and strategies which were later effectively used by others. His idea of economic self-sufficiency was successfully tried by the Nation of Islam that accounted to a large extent for the stability and survival of that organization. According to Gunnar Myrdal, Garvey's movement also highlighted some important facts: First, the African American masses, though generally meek and passive, could be effectively mobilized through powerful rhetoric and appeals to self-respect or even racial chauvinism. Second, that any leader who antagonized white America greatly would at best be restricted to a narrow circle, or worse, would be toppled altogether. What the movement underlined most effectively was disaffection amongst the African Americans with their material and emotional morass and their disillusionment with the American system. Any efforts for radical change, properly organized could get their support. Most important, the movement legitimized a kind of counter-racism where black was extolled to unprecedented heights in comparison with white. Garvey lauded everything black. Black stood for strength and beauty and not inferiority. He even declared God and Christ black to spare the African Americans the humiliation of worshipping the images of white man. He took a leaf out of the book of white racists and preached racial purity decrying any amalgamation of white with black. This clash of white and black ending in the triumph of the latter became embedded in the black psyche in America to emerge as a weapon of racial pride whenever, throughout the twentieth century, the African Americans felt threatened by rising “white” racism.

The mass appeal of Marcus Garvey in America and his failure to arouse Pan-Africanism outside showed the clear link between his vision and the hopes and resentments peculiar to the African Americans and not to Africans in other parts of the world. It was clear proof of the Americanism of African Americans. They had become American for all practical purposes and could not be made into Africans again. Therefore the language of protest against white racism—in this case couched in the language of counter-racism—had a lasting effect. But, on the other hand, the positive solution of returning to Africa did not gain many adherents. Its main appeal lay in a psychological relief to people alienated by their immediate environment. A number of organizations came up in the 1920s utilizing the tool of a new African identity while remaining in the United States, like, Peace Movement of Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Pacific Movement, the Brotherhood of Liberty for Black People and the Black Muslims. This very psychological nature of the solution became the undoing of Garvey's movement since his constituency had no real use for at least one part of his programme, i.e., returning to Africa. Further, the group identity created by Garvey's movement was negative as it was a reaction to white racism and utilized the weapons of white racists. It emphasized the separation of whites and blacks and did little to improve the economic conditions of the community. As stated in chapter 2, Jennifer Hoshchild has shown the importance of material success to be a black value as well as a white one. Continuing failure in this regard could only affect the identity of the community adversely. Having injected a strong dose of
counter-racism in the black protest movement in America, Marcus Garvey disappeared from the scene.\textsuperscript{25}

APPEAL TO TRADITION OF IDEALISM

Though Garvey had drawn a large number of followers from amongst the common people he had not been respected by the African American intelligentsia. Yet, even there wisps of his ideas in some form or the other continued to be shared by men more brilliant than him. One such person was W.E.B. DuBois. The first coloured graduate of Harvard University and a professor at Atlanta, DuBois challenged the supremacy of Booker T. Washington at the dawn of the twentieth century as the main bridge between the mainstream of American society and the African Americans. He viewed the latter's pandering to the white notions of racial justice and harmony as demeaning and ultimately harmful to the race. He was contemptuous of the choice between economic security and socio-political rights. As an American, DuBois asserted his right to both and at the same time. In the tussle between DuBois and Washington for a worldview for their people the epistemological tension at the heart of the American Republic lay bare. Washington accepted the lower position of his people hoping to mitigate it in the long run by appealing successfully to the American respect for material success. DuBois chose to challenge this reality on the basis of the ideological universalism and promises of equality written in American Declaration of Independence in 1776 and in

the constitution in 1863. The difference here, however, was more in the emphasis than in their objectives. Since Washington was financing court cases against segregation, one may suppose he was as aware of the injustice of it as was DuBois. But he was practical enough to realize the folly of pressing the collective energies of his people in that direction at a time when the national intellectual climate was so very much against further support to the black cause at the cost of any sections of whites. 26 DuBois fell in the tradition of American

26 In the Souls of Black Folks DuBois did certainly write about the problem of slavery, of race, and of the community's African heritage but he tested them against ideals of the American republic and not against some convoluted standards of racial logic as often did Washington. His denunciation of the treatment of the African Americans was also based on its being a gross violation of American ideals. Even when he agreed with white criticisms of the shortcomings of his people he did so as an equal. Without contrition or apology, he assumed the role of an intellectual to both the whites and blacks and not just the latter. He criticized the whites in the same breath as the blacks:

I freely acknowledge that it is possible, and sometimes best, that a partially undeveloped people should be ruled by the best of their stronger and better neighbors for their own good, until such time as they can start and fight the world's battles alone. I have already pointed out how sorely in need of such economic and spiritual guidance the emancipated Negro was, and I am quite willing to admit that if the representatives of the best white Southern public opinion were the ruling and guiding powers in the South today the conditions indicated would be fairly well fulfilled (W.E.B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folks, in John Hope Franklin, ed., Three Negro Classics [New York, 1969], p. 329).

In Up from Slavery, the comparable work of Booker T. Washington, white prejudices against blacks have been accommodated, though in the garb of old "daky jokes", by the author.

...and the question arose while he [a Negro teacher] was there as to the shape of the earth and how he would teach the children concerning this subject. He explained his position in the matter by saying that he was prepared to teach that the earth was either flat
Quakers—refusing to compromise the dignity of the individual for the sake of economic well-being. In his perfectionism too he was an heir to those reformers of old. But like them he was a voice heard but hardly ever heeded.

But if DuBois did not command the following that Washington did, he should not be considered ineffective. As a more cerebral leader his lack of mass appeal was only to be expected. But in his personal life and works, DuBois signified the falseness of the myth that the African Americans were mentally inferior to the whites. His works would do credit to a thinker of any colour. On the other hand, his career was the very epitome of the intellectual frustration suffered on account of colour and race. At the beginning of his career, DuBois attempted to win over the liberal opinion of both races and to arouse a sense of self-respect in the masses of his community. Towards this end he joined with a group of black and white anti-racists in 1909 to form the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Oswald Garrison

or round, according to the preferences of a majority of his patrons.

Or,

Starting thirty years ago with ownership here and there in a few quilts and pumpkins and chickens (gathered from miscellaneous sources)...

This is not to suggest that Washington was not aware of the tragic legacy of slavery in pushing the African Americans to the bottom of the society. In the very same work are scattered such insights as:

Some people may call this [chicken stealing by his slave mother] theft. If such a thing were to happen now, I should condemn it as theft myself. But taking place at the time it did, and for the reason that it did, no one could make me believe that my mother was guilty of thieving. She was simply a victim of the system of slavery.
Willard, grandson of Abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, was the first president of the organization. The message of the organization was carried to the people through the magazine Crisis. Unknown to DuBois perhaps his chosen method of protesting segregation and inequality was the same as Washington's only in a far more visible manner. The NAACP, as the most important organization fighting for civil rights till the 1950s, also banked upon court action to gain justice. However, till the Second World War and a more radical change in the global intellectual climate, the NAACP had little success in checking the growth of segregation or racial discrimination even at the policy level.

Meanwhile, DuBois grappled constantly with the troubling question of identity of the African Americans. Deeply conscious of the tragedy of slavery and the African roots of his people, he oscillated between African and American identities. Torn between the two, he developed the idea of a "double consciousness". He maintained that the African Americans were neither Africans nor Americans but something of both. Apart from opening him to attack from both sides of the debate, this position presented problems of a wider nature. If DuBois was to provide an alternative to the philosophy of Washington he had to express himself in terms of clear positions and concrete programmes. But his stance provided neither strategies for tackling the issues of everyday survival nor the emotional malaise induced by constant discrimination in the African Americans. Though less profound, Washington had a

But Washington was a pragmatic leader and recognized the need to fall in line with the majority's sentiments. DuBois, however, was more intensely focussed on the goal at hand.
 programme for the former and Garvey had one for the latter. Despite his contempt for Garvey, DuBois did embrace pan-Africanism as a viable strategy for racial uplift. He was instrumental in organizing Pan-African Congresses, of which four were held between 1919 and 1927 and a fifth and last in 1945. By the time he published his autobiography, *Dusk of Dawn*, in 1940 he had become convinced that the fate of African Americans was closely tied with the course of racism in the United States. They could not live together in close contact. He, therefore, advised them not to fight separation and segregation within the country but to use it intelligently to their advantage for mitigating poverty and economic deprivation. He also advised them to be prepared for being pushed out of their "American fatherland". However, here DuBois stumbled against the same rock of his people's attachment to the United States that had wrecked Garvey's Back-to-Africa scheme. As an emotional balm or even to proclaim their separate identity, the African Americans were prepared to accept an African identity but physical transfer to Africa did not elicit popular support. As a disillusioned American, DuBois himself left the United States for Africa where he died in 1963.

The failure and disillusionment of DuBois were testimony to the weakness of American idealism in mitigating the condition of blacks. The majority of whites continued with their prejudice against African Americans. The immigration of whites from different parts of Europe till 1930s, and the importance of "whiteness" for their assimilation, assured the continuing lowly position of blacks. DuBois, therefore, could not change the nature of emerging group identity of blacks which was taking on separatist racial tone in the cities at least. This period, however,
was destined to change circumstances in favour of a more successful thrust for black rights.

GREAT DEPRESSION, WORLD WAR II AND MODIFICATIONS IN AMERICAN CONTEXT

The challenge posed by the Great Depression in the 1930s and by the rise of fascism in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s unwittingly aided the cause of racial progress in United States.

The Great Depression initially, as could be expected, was harder for blacks to endure than whites. As economically the most vulnerable section of society, they were badly hit by rising prices and shrinking employment opportunities. Racism got worse. In 1930 white extremists in Atlanta urged “No Jobs for Niggers Until Every white Man Has a Job”.27 Old Ku Klux Klan practices of settling racial problems through the noose returned. The number of lynchings rose from 8 in 1932 to 28 in 1933, 15 in 1934, and 20 in 1935.28 But the collapse of tenant farming, brought about by the Depression as well as by some of the administrative measures aimed at combating it, led to another wave of black migration out of the South to the North and from rural to industrial settings. This increased the numbers of African Americans concentrated in the segregated areas of northern cities where racial cohesion and pride were at their strongest. Second, it moved large numbers of the community out of the reach of accommodationist traditions of race relations in the South to areas where the influence of militant and aggressive protest movements, like the Black

27 Morgan and Wynn, eds., n. 15, p. 257.
28 ibid.
Muslims and Marcus Garvey's Back-to-Africa movement, had been strong. In 1940, 77% of the black population had been located in the South; by 1950 their numbers had been reduced to 68%. 29 This was to have important implications in deciding the nature of black response to racism in the second half of the twentieth century.

Meanwhile, the 1932 elections returned a Democratic administration to the White House. Though Frederick D. Roosevelt had not shown any particular sympathy with the black cause but the general humanitarian tone of the New Deal reforms ended up extending some benefits to the community as the poorest of the poor. Moreover, the President's closest advisors like, Harold Ickes, Frances Perkins and Harry Hopkins were known humanitarians and gave the blacks a chance to have a hearing at the highest administrative levels. The President's wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, also proved a useful ally. Though discrimination and segregation persisted, since the implementation of the New Deal was in the hands of local officials, but “the New Deal offered Negroes more in material benefits and recognition than had any administration since the era of Reconstruction”. 30 The relief to the African Americans came in the form of federal relief to nearly 30% of black families, approximately 33% of federal housing put up under the New Deal and almost 25% of the loans distributed. 31 In the elections of 1936 the Democratic Party reaped the reward in the form of 75% of black votes. The African Americans emerged as an

29 ibid.
31 Morgan and Wynn, eds., n. 15, p. 258.
important voter segment from here onwards. Thus, the
Depression and the New Deal had the effect of concentrating
African Americans in well-defined areas, increasing their racial
consciousness and confidence, and improving their economic
condition.

The onset of WWII built upon the gains of this era. As
America became the "arsenal for democracy" unemployment
rates for whites came down dramatically but for blacks they
remained the same. There were protests in which individual
whites, stirred by the war-time pronouncements in favour of
democracy and equality, joined till the government, in 1941,
issued an executive order prohibiting discrimination in defence
plants. Even after Pearl Harbour and America's entry into the
war, the mood of black militance did not totally subside. African
American press and civil rights organizations kept up the
pressure by pointing out more articulately than during WWI the
contradictions between American practices and principles. The
Black Muslims refused to serve in the armed forces altogether
even at the cost of being jailed. Discrimination led to race riots
in Harlem in 1943 and there were clashes between the two
races in other cities too.

What was of particular significance about WWII, and the
opposition it inspired, was the debate over race which formed
the very basis of the Nazi view of humanity. Ludwig Schemann
summarized this view in 1931 by saying, "race defines a definite
physical type which is common to a larger national and tribal
circle of men, and maintains itself by hereditary descent....Race
is the alpha and omega of the life of nations in its entirety".32

Myth: The Fallacy of Race* (Walnut Creek, 1997), p. 52.
The Nazis, however, did not apply the concept of racial inequality solely, or even chiefly, to blacks. They challenged the status quo of the western racial assumptions by applying it to white peoples of the various nations of Europe. Some of these included strong powers like France whose citizens had contributed tremendously to the growth of western political hegemony and western modernist discourse privileging their civilization. They could not be expected to accept a new racial doctrine that discriminated against them, as they had discriminated against militarily weaker peoples of other continents; and branded them culturally inferior on the basis of their technological weaknesses, as they had earlier branded others. The Nazis were eager to apply the racial and imperialist doctrines, till then employed to regulate relations between the western and other cultures, to their relations with other Europeans, and with the same force. The alarmed scientists in western countries refuted Nazi racial notions with great vigour. Though one cannot castigate all anti-racist movement in the academia at this time as born out of an instinct for self-preservation—some of it was motivated by genuine intellectual repugnance against racism—but Nazism certainly pushed it higher on academic agenda. Once in circulation, however, the anti-racist discourse took on a life and logic of its own and could not be confined to checking white-on-white violence. Just as the Emancipation Proclamation had demolished the doctrine of natural inequality between the two races by recognizing the full humanity of blacks, so the new academic discourse began the process of destroying the bases of the prevalent fallacy of inherent inequality of ability between the two. As an indicator of the change in the academic circles may be quoted an excerpt
from Dr G. M. Morant's speech to the centenary meeting of the
Royal Anthropological Institute:

...the time has come when anthropologists must fully recognize fundamental changes in their treatment of the problem of racial classification. The idea that a race is a group of people separated from all others because of the distinctive ancestry of its members is implied whenever a racial label is used, but in fact we have no knowledge of the existence of such populations today or in any past time. 33

Considering that anthropology had been one of the main vehicles for giving a scientific veneer to racial classification of humans, 34 this may be considered a minor revolution, indeed.

The greater militancy on part of the older organizations like NAACP increased the number of their registered members rapidly in the 1940s and the 1950s. This, in turn, gave the organizations the visible strength to push ahead with their political agendas. The new-found political clout of the community and the greater sensitivity to questions of rights and justice made the white elite and common people both more amenable to their cause. During the 1930s, the NAACP launched a concerted attack on school segregation that slowly stripped the judicial fences around Jim Crow. The association's source of legal inspirations was built on a single proverb by the attorney Nathan Margold: that the reform climate of the New Deal favoured appeals to equal opportunity but not demands for integration. The NAACP therefore challenged the 1896 Plessey decision by indirection, claiming that inferior facilities mocked

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33 Dr G. M. Mormant. cited in ibid., p. 108.
34 See, ibid., pp. 41-98.
the claim of separate but equal. In this way it desegregated graduate and law schools in Maryland, Missouri, and other states unable to persuade Federal courts of an equal commitment to black and white students. Although it failed to pressurize the government to pass civil rights legislation but did manage a growing openness in national politics about the long forbidden subject of federal responsibility for racial justice.

The African Americans, however, were not united in deeming this strategy as the only one fit to challenge racial segregation. As far back as 1920s a number of black intellectuals had begun to question the advisability of following the slow and deliberate course of taking cases up through the courts while, as they saw it, the community suffered without relief. Some even then questioned any piecemeal approach of attacking one institution, for example, the education system, instead of trying to alter the whole social order. Such people as A. Philip Randolph and other socialists branded leaders like DuBois as a “handkerchief head”, that is a hat-in-hand Negro. In *The Messenger*, which Randolph edited, the NAACP was attacked as a bourgeoisie organization and an alternative to it in the form of a working man’s movement was advocated. Such leaders sought to merge the racial issue into the wider issue of social justice for all oppressed minorities and the poor of all colours. This strategy of crossing the colour line on a platform of justice to all was to be tried later in 1980s by Jesse Jackson again. However, both times it failed to take off. August Meir and Elliott Rudwick contend that this was because, in the 1940s, Randolph’s ideological rhetoric was too much for many blacks to comprehend; his integrationist appeal was too much for
many whites to stomach. Such radical philosophy therefore continued to exist on the periphery of the black movements for racial justice.

Just as the Plessey decision in 1896 had put the seal of reaction on efforts for black equality so it was a decision by the Supreme Court, in Brown vs. Board of Education at Topeka in 1954, which removed that seal and put the issue back on the list of national priorities. In this landmark judgement the Supreme Court finally struck down the doctrine of “separate but equal” to recognize that separation necessarily entails inequality. The decision did not dismantle the discriminatory regime instantly but it did help to catalyze the forces that would eventually bring that about. For the first time since the end of Reconstruction the law had changed to side with the African Americans. In a place like the United States, where all conceptions of rights are sharply legal and constitutional in nature, this event was of singular importance. The African Americans found the morality of their struggle broaden from a minority’s morality to become an “American” morality.

It was this perception in a nebulous form that now informed the defiance of discriminatory laws by individual African Americans. Though blacks had, individually and sporadically, challenged such laws since 1930s but their efforts had generally been individual and community support to them nil. The judgement encouraged more such questioning on a wider scale so that within five years of it a full fledged civil rights movement rose up within the country. Even at the beginning of 1950s, one would have found it difficult to predict

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that such a movement, propelled and carried forward mainly by blacks, would be possible in near future. There was nothing in the failure of most of the strategies of the first half of the twentieth century to predict this. But what made the difference was not only the changed intellectual climate, the ghettoization of blacks, their exposure to war-time rhetoric and conditions but also, as so often happens in history, the rise of a leader who could tie all these threads together and work a more meaningful pattern on the national fabric. It appeared as an effort at racial integration where the increasingly separatist and negative ethnicity of blacks could be reshaped to follow the pattern of a “normal” American minority’s assimilation. The dynamics of the black struggle would take a new turn and put forth a few pressing demands that would bring the issue of racism into sharper focus.