Chapter Two

Introduction to Black History

According to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, experience is related to “those things that have happened to a person which in turn influence the way that person thinks and behaves.” (533) Accordingly whatever was experienced by our ancestors, whatever comes to us in the form of our culture, tradition, myth, legend etc. contributes in the making and shaping of our experiences as an individual and as a race. Our lost and fond past, our ugly and beautiful present and our though remote yet hopeful future shape our experiences and consequently shape our destiny. More over certain historical and intellectual historical materials are necessary to be studied for a fuller understanding of the American authors. The necessity becomes all the more obligatory when one has to study the experiences of a black writer of the caliber of Langston Hughes. It is in this light the study of history of the Afro-Americans becomes indispensable so that their thoughts, attitudes and philosophy can be understood in a better context and perspective. Langston Hughes was not born as an isolated individual with strait-jacketed or prejudiced thoughts and emotions. The hopes, frustrations and experiences given vent to by the poet exploded like a volcano that the poet had accumulated in him from his unique history and the present predicament. In fact, the Afro-American literature as a body of literature started in the pre-revolutionary war period and since then this literature has been recognized internationally as well as nationally since its inception in the late 18th century. Afro-Americans launched their literature in North America during the second half of the 18th century, joining the war of words between England and its rebellious colonies
with a special sense of mission. The earliest Afro-American writers sought to demonstrate that the proposition of “life, liberty and pursuit of happiness” (Horton 68) in the Declaration of Independence required that black Americans be extended the same human rights as those claimed by white Americans. Moreover the American civilization have constantly been governed by the dynamics of “Idealism and Opportunity.” (Horton 4) Now the question arises what were these dynamics? Why these dynamics were not for the black race when, after all, they had contributed equally in the building of America? How the denial of these dynamics ultimately led to the sprouting and growth of a new kind of literature hitherto unknown to the Americans? The history of America is the history of changes introduced in the patterns of cultures which, as asserted by Harold E. Davis “involved the selection by Americans of elements from European cultures, the assimilation of elements of the indigenous cultures, and of some elements of African origin.” (3) Thus the blacks have contributed to the American history and it for this reason that it becomes all the more pertinent for us to re-understand and re-analyze the history of the blacks. Their past experiences not only shaped their own personality and character but were also responsible for a new cult of literature in America.

“America had often been discovered before Columbus, but it had always been hushed up” says Oscar Wilde. (Sharma 217) It was colonized mostly by persons seeking freedom of religious conscience. But the history of the blacks can not be hushed up which goes back to the early 16th century when the African slaves were transported to the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the Caribbean, Mexico and Central and South America. “The experience of slavery was not new to Africa, but
exploitation on such a large scale was.” (Longman 6)

Landowners in the American colonies originally met their need for forced labour by enslaving a limited number of natives, and ‘hiring’ many more European indentured servants. In exchange for their transportation across the Atlantic, the servants committed to work for the landowner for four to seven years. A few slaves were imported from Africa as early as 1619. With the spread of tobacco farming in the 1670s, and the diminishing number of people willing to sign-on as indentured servants in the 1680s, increasing numbers of slaves were brought in from Africa. They replaced “native American slaves, who were found to be susceptible to diseases of European origin… small numbers of white people, were also enslaved by kidnapping or for crimes or debts.” (Chronology on the History of Slaves and Racism) The Africans “came from many racial stocks and many tribes, from the spirited Hausas, the gentle Mandingos, the creative Yorubas, from the Igbos, Efiks and Krus, from the proud Fantins, the warlike Ashantis, the shrewd Dahomeans, the Binis and Sengalese.” (Black Resistance: Slavery in the United States) “Eventually 600 to 650 thousand slaves arrived in America against their will.” (Chronology on the History of Slaves and Racism)

Slavery was an attractive proposition to landowners. In 1638, “the price tag for an African male was around twenty seven dollars, while the salary of a European labourer was about seventy cents per day.” (Chronology on the History of Slaves and Racism) It proved that a slave’s full life had less value compared to forty days of labour earned by a European!

Both slave transportation and slavery itself in the United States were brutal institutions. The fact was that during the passage from Africa the mortality rate of the
slaves stood at a hefty fifty percent! Slaves who were too ill to survive the trip were sometimes thrown overboard to drown. Once on American soil, slaves were largely treated as property, to be freely bought and sold. Some slave owners allowed their slaves to marry; others imposed marriages on them. Slave marriages were not recognized by the states. The owner was free to split up a couple or family at any time simply by selling some of his slave members. Slave children were sent into the fields at about twelve years of age where they worked from dusk to dawn.

Slavery was also brutal in Canada. In 1734, a black slave, Marie Joseph Angelique, objected to slavery and her expected sale. She burned down her owner’s home in Montreal in protest. The fire spread and eventually destroyed forty-six buildings. She was given a horrifying sentence to have her hands chopped off and then to be burned alive. This was later reduced on appeal to simple hanging. Duhaime also remembers the same horrifying past,

“Even in 1824, an eighteen year old New Brunswick boy was hung by the neck until dead for having stolen 241 cents. In Ontario, upper Canada, theft can mean being branded with a red-hot iron on the palm of the hand or a public whipping.” (Montreal Hangs a Slave)

Many, perhaps most, slaves engaged in passive resistance, “They worked no harder than they had to, put on deliberate slowdowns, staged sit-down strikes and fled to the swamps en masse at cotton picking time. They broke implements, trampled the crops and took silver, wine, money, corn, cotton and machines.” (Black Resistance: Slavery in the United States) Others were more aggressive, “They poisoned masters and mistresses with arsenic, ground glass and spiders beaten up in buttermilk. They
chopped the slaveholders to pieces with axes and burned their houses, cotton gins and barns to the ground.” (Black Resistance: Slavery in the United States)

Thomas Jefferson, the principal drafter of the Declaration of Independence, was a tireless promoter of civil liberties. However, he did not conceive of the universal nature of human rights. He owned slaves himself, and even fathered mixed-race children by one of his slaves. Some of his thoughts on slavery were recorded in his “Notes on the State of Virginia.” (Thomas Jefferson on Slavery) He was opposed to general emancipation, arguing that “deep-rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections by the blacks of the injuries they have sustained…” would hopelessly destabilize society. (Clarke 78) Jefferson was one of the promoters of the American Colonization Society, which was organized in 1816. It sought to free young Afro-Americans by educating them and transporting them to a colony outside the United States. But, as remarked by Prof. C. P. Hill, “In many ways he was a strange mixture. He was at once a shrewd politician and a dreamer.” (54) Jefferson never freed his own slaves!

The Anglican Church in Virginia debated during the period 1680-1730 about whether slaves should receive Christian religious instruction. They decided that such instruction should be given. However, “the landowners and slave owners who felt that if the slaves were allowed to convert to Christianity it would thwart the education programs and then they could no longer be enslaved.” (Chronology on the History of Slaves and Racism)

On the eve of the American Civil War approximately four million enslaved Afro-Americans lived in the Southern region of the United States of America. The
vast majority worked as plantation slaves in the production of cotton, sugar, tobacco, and rice. Very few of these enslaved people were African born principally because the importation of enslaved Africans to the United States officially ended in 1808, although thousands were smuggled into the nation illegally in the fifty years following the ban on international trade. These enslaved people were the descendants of twelve to thirteen million African forbearers ripped from their homes and forcibly transported to America in a massive slave trade dating from the 1400s. Most of these people, if they survived the brutal passages from Africa, ended up in the Caribbean (West Indies) or in South and Central America. Brazil alone imported around five million enslaved Africans. This forced migration is known today as the *African Diaspora*, and it is one of the greatest human tragedies in the history of the world.

From the beginning of slavery in British North America around 1619, when a Dutch ship brought twenty enslaved Africans to the Virginia colony at Jamestown, nearly 240 years passed until the thirteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution which officially ended slavery in 1865. This means that twelve generations of blacks survived and lived in America as enslaved people.

Slavery in the United States was part of a long established system of labour exploitation that dates to ancient times. Much of the ancient world was composed of well-organized slave societies of one sort or another. Slavery existed in the great civilizations of ancient Greece, Rome, Egypt, China, and even among the Inca and Aztec worlds of pre-colonial America. The business of capturing and trading enslaved people was also a fundamental part of human society throughout recorded history. Prior to the Atlantic trade of enslaved Africans to the America, Muslim traders out of
the middle East and Northern Africa purchased, sold, and captured millions of enslaved Africans and central Europeans in a slave-trading network that extended from present day Hungary to Southeastern Asia and the far East.

There was nothing especially new about slavery as a system of labour and the exploitation of people when the Spanish and the Portuguese first began bringing slaves in 1503 from western Africa to replace native Americans in the gold mines of the Caribbean and central America. The extent and impact, however, of the vast numbers of enslaved Africans thereafter brought to the New World to work in the sugar, coffee, tobacco, rice, and cotton plantations was simply phenomenal. This transatlantic trade created a new global economy and an international world. This new Atlantic world was unlike anything ever known before linking America to Africa and Europe in ways that resulted in the development of Europe and North America and the un-development of Africa and the rest of the America. It is not too much to say that profits made from slavery and the slave trade in the years from 1600 to 1860 greatly contributed to the emergence of Western Europe and the United States as the “powerful republic of the hemisphere -- and ultimately of the world.” (Bailey 457-58)

Although the Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch controlled most of the slave trade to America from 1500 to 1700, English and North American traders moved aggressively into the business after 1730. It is estimated that around three lakh slaves were bought and sold through Liverpool alone in the eighteenth century. New York, Boston, and Charleston also thrived as homeports for slave trading vessels. The pattern of trade resembled a triangle on the map of the Atlantic world, with rum shipped from New England to Africa to be bartered for slaves who were then
transported to the West Indies and exchanged for sugar or molasses to be shipped to New England. This triangle model (usually referred to as a pattern of triangular trade) is somewhat misleading, however, because slave-trading vessels took part in pieces of the trade or deviated from the pattern.

Slavery in North America differed significantly from slavery in the rest of America. In the first place, far fewer slaves were brought into what became the United States, only around five lakh compared to perhaps twelve to thirteen million imported into the Caribbean, South and Central America. Most of these imports to North America ended by 1770, moreover, except for a burst of activity by a few Southern states after the American Revolution. Secondly, the fact that the English people had little experience with slavery in comparison to the Spanish and Portuguese meant that little historical reference existed for them to draw upon in the early years. Initially, the first slaves in the Virginia colony were looked upon as workers rather than as property, and some of them were treated much like white indentured servants. The enslaved Africans often worked along side the indentured European labourers in the tobacco fields of the Chesapeake region. It was cheaper in the early years to bring in white labourers from England as indentured servants than to pay for slaves. Moreover most whites looked upon Africans as morally and intellectually inferior.

For complex reasons, the value and presence of enslaved workers from Africa began to grow after 1676 in the Virginia colony. Importantly too, the supply of white indentured servants began to decline as more working-class whites found employment back home in British industries, commerce, and shipping. And the increase in the life span of indentured servants in the new world meant that many of them began to live
long enough to claim the share of lands promised to those who had laboured the full terms to their indenture—usually six years. Enslaved Africans, on the other hand, could not easily blend into the surrounding white population by escaping and native Americans were often employed as slave-catchers; nor could they make demands upon their masters for humane treatment, justice, or land.

But most importantly, upper-class whites began to fear an alliance between indentured servants and enslaved Africans after Bacon’s rebellion which occurred in 1676. This rebellion against the planter gentry by unruly, lower-class whites in the interior of the colony convinced upper-class whites in the coastal regions to replace indentured labourers with the more easily disciplined and less expensive slaves. It mattered, too, that Virginia passed laws defining slaves as chattel property whose status was both lifelong and hereditary. So after 1680, Virginia planters began buying large numbers of Africans.

Slavery took on a different look to the South of the Virginia colony. In the coastal plains or low-country regions of Georgia and Carolina, the cultivation of rice on large plantations more closely resembled the practice of slavery in the West Indies. Most of the first English settlers in this region had migrated from Barbados to the area around Charleston, in the beginning of 1670. Bringing slaves with them, the rice planters never employed indentured servants but imported large cargoes of slaves directly from Africa and most of them were African males. By the time of the American Revolution, nearly one lakh Africans had been transplanted to the Charleston area as slaves. In this region, nearly ninety percent of the population was black. By the 1750s, the cultivation of rice and slavery spread westward into Georgia,
which was established in 1732 as a refuge for England’s poor, including male convicts and impoverished women and children. At first the colony banned slavery, but the lure of profits found white planters ignoring the ban and by 1776 the colony had more blacks living there than whites, approximately fifteen thousand.

It was in the low-country of Carolina and Georgia where planters attempted to use native Americans as slaves. But like elsewhere the problems of runaways -- Indians could easily escape into the vast surrounding forests, the susceptibility of the native Americans to disease -- especially malaria, and the skilled agricultural backgrounds of Africans combined to make the Africans more useful as labourers. Enslaved Africans in the low-country were accustomed to sub-tropical climates, and they were often ‘seasoned’ hands who had worked in the West Indies for months and years before being sold to planters in the low-country.

At the time of the American Revolution, slavery was a profitable but not all-pervasive institution in the British colonies of North America. Most prosperous in the low-country areas, it was beginning to reach a point of diminishing returns in the colonies of Virginia and Maryland. The hundred years of tobacco cultivation had exhausted much of the land in the Chesapeake area. Also, there seemed to be little likelihood that tobacco and rice could be as easily cultivated in the lands west of the coastal colonies.

During the great constitutional debates in the late 1780s over what the new nation would look like in the future, it was commonly assumed that slavery would gradually end soon in the next century. White Southerners nevertheless managed to win from the North, three significant concessions protecting the institution of slavery;
The Federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, which enabled slave catchers to cross-state lines in the pursuit of runaway slaves;

The Three-Fifths Clause Agreement to count every slave as three-fifths of a free person in determining a state’s representation in the House of Representatives and in the Electoral College; and

The continuation of the slave trade with Africa until 1808, which brought thousands of slaves to America in a rush of slave-trading activity.

Still, all the signs suggested that slavery was a terminal institution in the nation at the time of the ratification of the U.S. Constitution in 1789. A number of Northern states had abolished slavery by 1800, and the federal congress banned slavery from the vast region of unorganized territory North of the Ohio river with the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. Dozens of anti-slavery societies sprang up in the Northern states and the upper South, and many enslaved Afro-Americans openly challenged the system by suing for their freedom in state courts and by running away. Nevertheless, the ending of slavery did not happen for another 60 years; in fact, it took on new life in the new century, spreading rapidly from Georgia to Texas by 1830.

One of the most curious facts of U.S. slavery is that slaves in the U.S. South reproduced themselves in numbers equal to the white birth rate. In almost all other states in America, slave mortality rates were so high that the slave population required massive importation of slaves in order for the institution to survive. In the American South, on the other hand, slaves tended to live in strong family environments, especially on the large plantations, with extended kinship networks that enabled the slaves to reproduce themselves naturally. Planters well understood that a family environment helped to control slaves in the sense that the threat of breaking up the
slave family worked to undermine slave rebellions and disobedience. Equally important was the fact that because of the ban on the importation of slaves into the United States after 1808, planters understood that good medical care and tolerable working conditions enabled their slaves to live longer lives. This meant that slaves were considered not only a source of labour but also a capital investment that might actually increase in value, especially in the case of enslaved women. With no new slaves allowed to enter the nation legally after 1808, the enslaved Afro-Americans on hand were bound to increase in value in proportion to the increase in demand for the cotton they produced. As the western states opened up to cotton production, a great new market for slaves increased the value of slaves even more in the upper-South.

Just as slavery began in America with the slave trade from Africa, it continued to grow and thrive in the United States because of the internal, domestic slave trade. As Prof. Parkes has remarked, “An institution which in 1793 had few defenders and was widely believed to be approaching dissolution had come to be regarded two generations later as the very foundation of Southern society.” (206) By 1860 some six lakh slaves had been transported from the upper-South to the lower-South. Many of these enslaved people who were carried South as slaveholders, purchased plantations and moved their families to the new cotton regions of the Mississippi delta. Many more slaves were shipped to the South by slave traders who gathered surplus slaves in Virginia and Maryland. Natchez, Mississippi, for example, was the second largest slave market in the lower-South after New Orleans. In the upper-South, Alexandria and Richmond, Virginia, prospered as collection markets for slaves brought for sale from throughout the region.

The most important thing to be said about slavery from the perspective of the
enslaved is that millions of Afro-Americans endured slavery by making a world for themselves in the midst of their bondage. By 1776, a viable Afro-American culture had emerged out of slavery, fashioned and shaped by the slaves themselves partly out of the African past but mainly in response to slavery as an institution and at the foundation of this enslaved culture stood the black family. Because of the nature of the work performed in slavery and the scarcity of labour, slaveholders usually allowed their human chattel to live in family cabins and to observe family connections. Slaveholders did this for simple economic reasons and to make it easier to control the slaves. Whatever the reasons, slaves took advantage of this opportunity to use the family environment as a refuge and as a source of cultural endurance and collective experience.

Although slave marriages had no legal standing, most slaveholders allowed slaves to select their own mates. Enslaved men usually courted their girlfriends and married them in ceremonies conducted by enslaved holy men and local black preachers. On large plantations, such marriages typically occurred among slaves from different plantations until the nineteenth century when stricter rules of travel in the neighborhood began to be enforced.

The extended family network within which most slaves lived emerged principally as a way of coping with the separation of family members in slavery. Children from a slave marriage became the property of the slaveholder who owned the enslaved mother. In many cases, slaveholders placed with a functioning slave family a child left behind by a parent’s death or recent sale, or those children recently purchased from slave traders. Parents tried to name their children after family members, usually a father or uncle or grandfather who lived elsewhere or aunts or
grandmothers who had died or had been sold off the place. Later on, when some
slaves began using surnames, they tended to take the names of the slaveholder who
had originally owned them or their parents.

In addition to relying on the strength of family networks, the enslaved turned to
religion as a means of coping with slavery. During the colonial era, most enslaved
Africans retained as best as they could their indigenous African religions or Islam in
the cases of those who had come from Muslim countries. It was not until the mid-
eighteenth century that large numbers of Africans began converting to Christianity
during the religious revival movement that swept over the English colonies. During
this great awakening, English methodists and baptists preached an evangelical style of
Christianity that appealed to the emotions and offered salvation to all those who
embraced Christ regardless of one’s class or race. This new emotional religion
blended nicely with African spiritual beliefs and religious practices. Its emphasis on
singing, emotional zeal, spiritual rebirth, and total body immersion in water during
baptism was especially attractive to enslaved blacks. Those white slaveholders who
embraced this evangelical Christianity allowed blacks to attend white churches as long
as the enslaved Christians sat apart from them and took communion at separate tables.

Within the world of slavery, blacks taught themselves a new language,
practiced new art forms, and played a new kind of music that enabled them to endure
the horrors of their bondage. Although most slaves had lost their African languages
over the generations, some managed to hold onto parts of their old ways of speaking.
In those areas where fresh infusions of African slaves arrived as late as 1808, like the
coastal low-country, sea islands off Georgia, and the low-land marshes of Louisiana,
African dialects hung on throughout the slave era. The Gullah and Geechees dialects, which are still spoken today, employ African words and grammatical elements within a basic English structure. More importantly, the loss of African language found blacks fashioning a kind of creole slave language that enabled them to communicate with one another. Most whites looked upon this new language as crude and badly informed instead of viewing it as a new language rich in sense of place and meaning for the enslaved. This creole English (or enslaved English) enabled blacks to communicate with each other in ways not easily understood by their white overlords.

The same point can be made about the music that came out of the slave experience. In attempting to keep enslaved Africans from communicating with each other, whites banned the use of drums. In their place, the enslaved perfected an African based dance and music that reproduced the rhythms and cadences of African drumming. They substituted hand clapping, body slapping, tapping the feet and rhyming shouts to accompany jigs, shuffles, struts and back step dances. Much of their musical expression occurred while worshipping, at funerals and weddings, and while socializing in the evening after work. The songs they sang, while they worked during the day, helped them to regulate the pace of their work, especially the call and response style of singing and their spiritual songs blended a style of sadness and jubilation that produced moving lyrics and uplifting messages of liberation and freedom. As a result, a viable Afro-American music emerged in ante-bellum America that soon became one of the world’s most original art forms and the basis of modern day blues and jazz music. This experience of the blacks was precious especially in context of literature that they reproduced in the years to come.

At its heart, American slavery was a brutal system based upon physical force,
threats, torture, sexual exploitation, and intimidation. Any black resisting overtly the orders of a slaveholder, or almost any white in the community, could expect immediate and often brutal retaliation. Few laws prevented slaveholders from doing whatever they wanted with their human property. Accepted methods of punishment for slaves included verbal rebukes, a few cuts with a stick or riding whip, kicks to the body, boxing of ears, confinement in corn cribs or tool sheds, branding on the flesh of the hand or head with a hot iron applied for twenty seconds, and mutilation of the body by clipping the ears, breaking legs, severing fingers and slitting tongues. In some cases, slaves were forced to wear iron chains and even iron masks on their heads for weeks and months at a time. But the most common form of slave punishment was a severe whipping. Slave codes usually defined as a moderate whipping the laying on of thirty-nine lashes on the bare back. In some cases, the whippings could be quite severe in number. For slaves who lived on large plantations, whippings and similar punishments were common, and few slaves escaped at least one severe whipping in their life.

Perhaps the greatest agony for the enslaved stemmed from the knowledge that one could be sold from family and friends at any moment. Usually slaves were sold for one of the following reasons, the slave was so troublesome as to undermine the functioning of the plantation; the estate was broken up at the death of the slaveholder; an economic downturn forced slaveholders to liquidate their properties; or else slaveholders just wanted the slave gone for personal reasons that frequently involved the sexual exploitation of enslaved women. Several hundred thousand slaves were thus sold and transported to the lower South in the nineteenth century. Almost all of them were members of families torn apart by sale and most of them never saw their
families ever again!

The enslaved African and Afro-Americans resisted their masters and others in the white community as best as they could without risking severe punishment or sale of themselves or family members. Perhaps the most common resistance took the form of workplace sabotage. Slaves tried to control the work pace set for them by the masters so that the least able of their group would not be whipped or sold for falling behind. Individuals also tried to gum up the works as much as possible. This could take the form of setting fire to a barn, walking a horse off a cliff, abusing tools and animals, or just doing less than careful work. So frequent was the abuse of work animals by slaves that most planters began using mules rather than horses. A mule is much stronger than a horse and too stubborn to be forced off a cliff by even the most persistently abusive slave.

This is not to say, however, that slaves did not openly rebel against their masters. The history of slavery is filled with slave rebellions that were both organized and spontaneous. From the very beginning of slavery, black captives tried to overthrow their slaveholders on the ships transporting them from Africa. Though many tried but only a few succeeded.

Among the other slave rebellions that stand out for their daring and national consequences are the uprising in South Carolina in 1526 against the Spanish, the New York city rebellion in 1712 and the “Nat Turner revolt of 1831 in Virginia in which 61 persons, largely women and children, were brutally massacred.” (Horton 384) Although each of these rebellions was brutally put down, but not before spreading the fear among white slaveholders who responded with stricter laws and severe penalties
to avoid any hint of rebellion. After the Nat Turner rebellion, much of the South became an armed camp. Slave patrols were stepped up and the time when slaves could move relatively freely around at night came to an abrupt end.

It was Abraham Lincoln, Prof. Elson says, who was “born among the lowliest of the lowly, trained in the merciless school of adversity and penury, he rose in public life and became the leading American of his time. Entering upon his great office at the moment when the forces of freedom and of slavery were ready to grapple in deadly conflict, he grasped the reins of government with a master hand; and but for his consummate ability, many believe the Union could not have been saved.” (740) When Southern states responded to the election of Lincoln by forming the Confederate States of America and seceding from the United States, most enslaved and free Afro-Americans knew that slavery lay at the heart of the rebellion. They knew that Southern whites seceded in order to preserve and protect the institution of slavery. White Southerners feared that, with Lincoln as President, the anti-slavery forces in the Northern states would ram through a constitutional amendment ending slavery. They also feared that Lincoln, the first Republican President and a man openly opposed to slavery, would appoint anti-slavery judges to federal courts, including the Supreme Court.

Northern free blacks responded to the outbreak of war between the North and the South by volunteering to fight for the Union. But, it took two years for the North to accept blacks as soldiers. Lincoln rejected the initial offers of volunteer units of black soldiers because he feared that it might ultimately become a war against slavery. He feared that, by accepting black soldiers, he would undermine white support for the war and might lose loyal border states like Missouri to the confederacy. President
Abraham Lincoln was determined to fight the war as a battle to save the Union rather than as a war to end slavery. To this end, he refused to allow for the enlistment of black soldiers until mounting numbers of white casualties softened white public opinion towards using blacks in combat.

In the summer of 1862, five black infantry regiments were authorized for action in the sea island off South Carolina and Georgia. Six months later, following Lincoln’s *emancipation proclamation* on January 1, 1863, which officially ended slavery in Confederate areas not under Union authority; black units were formed in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. In May of 1863, the war department created the *Bureau of Coloured Troops* and began vigorously recruiting black soldiers. The most famous of these Northern regiments was the 54th Massachusetts, which counted 100 dead and 146 wounded in its assault on Fort Wagner at Charleston Harbor on July 18, 1863. Due to the 54th Massachusetts’ valiant efforts, no one could doubt of the ability of black soldiers to fight or their willingness to die for the Union cause.

Black soldiers also confronted angry reaction from Confederate soldiers that made their duty in the field especially dangerous. For the most part, Confederate soldiers treated black soldiers as runaway slaves to be executed when captured or else sold into slavery. The great black leader, Frederick Douglass, demanded that President Lincoln take actions to prevent the summary execution of captured black soldiers by threatening to stop his recruitment efforts. The President announced that for every black soldier killed or sold into slavery, a rebel prisoner would be executed or put to hard labour. Yet, Lincoln’s order did not end the execution or enslavement of captured black soldiers, partly because he never carried it out! No Confederate prisoners were ever executed under the policy.
In one of the worst episodes of the war, Confederates under the command of Nathan Bedford Forrest, massacred Union soldiers at Fort Pillow on the Tennessee river on April 12, 1864, giving no quarter, especially to surrendering black soldiers. It was Bedford who later became infamous as the founder of Ku Klux Klan which “dramatized and encouraged racial hatreds.” (Horton 406) Lincoln refused, however, to carry out his earlier proclamation to execute rebel prisoners, probably understanding that Confederate soldiers would never recognize the legitimacy of Afro-American soldiers.

In those areas where the soldiers of the Confederacy and the Union met in battle, enslaved blacks experienced the special hardships of war. Forces from both sides abused the enslaved by forcing them to work in difficult and often deadly tasks, separated them from their families, and molested especially women left defenseless by the war. Thousands of slaves were uprooted as their owners marched them into the interior and to faraway Texas to escape invading Union forces. Although Union forces molested few white women in the occupied Confederacy, many enslaved women were raped, robbed, and assaulted by Union soldiers.

More than anything else, the outbreak of war offered enslaved Afro-Americans the opportunity to break for freedom and to liberate them. At the first sign of hostilities, blacks stopped acting like slaves and broke for freedom in large numbers. Invading Union troops encountered armies of black refugees fleeing to Union lines. Most came with bare clothes on their bodies. The waves of black refugees threatened to overwhelm Union war efforts, pressuring Lincoln to establish a refuge program wherein women, children, and the elderly were initially put in refugee camps and then placed on abandoned or occupied plantations to work for wages. The able-bodied
black males were also recruited into the army and the black units served as a home

guard on the plantations where the black’s families lived and worked. Nearly one lakh
black refugees lived in these camps and worked on occupied plantations protected by
black soldiers during the war in the Mississippi river valley and in the coastal regions
of Georgia and South Carolina. Confederate guerrilla forces often hit these
plantations, killing blacks and taking them back into slavery.

For most Southern slaves and Northern free blacks, the Civil War experience
represented a high point in their history. After the war, the nation, all but, abandoned
efforts at providing justice for the formerly enslaved except during a few short years
from 1865 to 1876, known as the era of reconstruction. After that brief period, during
which Southern blacks experienced significant political and social empowerment,
there descended upon the region over hundred years of segregation, lynching,
disfranchisement, and racial violence commonly known as the “era of Jim Crow --
conclusively demonstrated by the distinguished Southern historian C. Vann
Woodward.” (Horton 408)

The bleak and unpromising past of the blacks in no way indicate that there was
no literary and journalistic activity in such a troublesome past. It is a fact known to a
very few that forty black-owned and edited newspapers were published in the United
States before the American Civil War. Most of them were short-lived, and many of
them left little evidence of their existence. In all but a few cases, the papers were
independently owned. They appealed in most cases to a small but devoted readership
in their local communities, although several had national and even international
appeal. In just about every case, the black editors who printed and produced these
papers were crusaders, men and women with a mission and zeal. They used their words and their printer’s ink to wage war on the inequality and racism that raged all around them; when to be black was to be considered inferior and hence a slave by the vast majority of white Americans.

The abolishment of slavery was paramount in the minds of these black journalists and their supporters. Many of these papers focused on this issue almost exclusively, but their editors did not always agree on the means for achieving that goal. For example, the nation’s first black newspaper, *Freedom’s Journal*, founded in New York city on March 16, 1827, debated intensely within its own pages the issue of whether or not blacks should strive for integration in America or push for separation and even re-settlement in Africa. The intensity of the debate brought the paper down, with its founding editors, Samuel E. Cornish and John B. Russwurm, parting ways by 1829. Russwurm eventually left for Africa, where he published a newspaper called the *Liberia Herald* and Cornish started his own paper, *The Rights of All* which advocated a more militant antislavery position in opposition to colonization.

The runaway slave and great anti-slavery advocate Frederick Douglass published the most influential black newspaper in the nation. A person feels adrift on uncharted and perilous seas bereft of both compass and North Star. But his paper, the *North Star*, which ran from 1847 to 1851, was not adrift. It supported abolitionism, civil rights for blacks, women’s rights, and numerous other such reforms. This well-written and carefully edited paper reached an international audience and it established Douglass as the leading voice for immediate abolition of slavery by means of politics and even violence. Douglass’ position contrasted with the stance of many white
abolitionists, such as Lloyd Garrison, who rejected politics and violence in favour of appealing to the conscience of slaveholders to end slavery. Douglass’ paper continued until 1851, when it merged with the Liberty Party Paper to form Frederick Douglass’ Paper, which openly endorsed political abolitionism.

These antebellum black papers were published principally in the Northern and Midwestern states, most particularly in New York, followed by Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Massachusetts. Two black papers were published in Texas and one in Alabama, but these were church-based papers and did not engage in political issues. Two other papers for American audiences were published in Canada. The antebellum black press depended largely on the ability and energy of its black editors and publishers as well as white supporters and a few wealthy black patrons. Among these was James Forten, who had fought in the American Revolution and made money as a Philadelphia manufacturer of sails. On the eve of the Civil War, the black press had an established track record and could well acclaim a measure of success in reaching the goals articulated by Frederick Douglass -- to attack slavery in all its forms and aspects; advocate universal emancipation; and the moral and intellectual improvement of the coloured people. That day came in 1865 with the ratification of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution which abolished slavery in the nation.

What follows is a listing of the most well known black-edited and black-owned newspapers published before the Civil War. Not much is known about many of these papers beyond their place of publication, duration, and editors. In many cases, there are no surviving copies yet their influence in describing the experiences and giving a place to the Afro-Americans in the troubled land is phenomenal.
The Anglo-African Magazine, (1859-1865) published in New York city and edited by Thomas and Robert Hamilton, was a monthly illustrated magazine that covered literature, science, history, art, poetry, and topics related to slavery through editorials, satirical essays, and poetic and comic verses. It was perhaps the most influential Afro-American journal in the immediate pre-civil war era. It featured biographies of prominent Afro-Americans such as Martin Shed Cary, Martin R. Delaney, Frederick Douglass, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, John Mercer Langston, and William Cooper Nell and also offered exhaustive coverage of issues related to slavery and abolitionism, such as the trial and execution of John Brown. Still in publication during the Civil War, it sought to uplift its black readers and serve as a model of black culture in Manhattan. Hamilton, a fierce advocate for a fair and impartial picture of blacks in America, pledged to give a thorough and impartial review of the conditions and experiences of black New Yorkers, filling the void left by the established white press. His paper especially strived to promote the image of black heroes, such as Othello, to counter the ridiculous image of black minstrels and other black characters that had become a mainstay of white, popular culture.

A weekly newspaper published by Charles B. Ray and Philip A. Bell, The Coloured American (1837-1842) began as the weekly advocate. Although the paper was based in New York, it published a Philadelphia edition, making it possibly the first Afro-American publication to operate in more than one city. Determined to counter the image of black Americans as a downtrodden people, the newspaper served as a model for black youth, inspiring them in its pages to strive for greatness -- even to presidency of the United States. Commenting on social issues such as the dress of
Afro-American women, *The Coloured American* embodied a middle-class set of values, running articles that preached moderation and propriety in life. It cautioned, for example, in 1837, that women should not be overly fashionable and ornamental in their style of clothes.

The great black abolitionist Frederick Douglass brought out a monthly magazine, *Douglass’ Monthly* in 1858, aimed partly at England and partly at maintaining the support of British supporters -- financial and otherwise -- for the antislavery crusade in America. During the first years of the civil war, the *Monthly* urged the emancipation of the enslaved and the British to break with the confederacy. This newspaper editorialized against slavery, covered significant events like the raid on *Harpers Ferry*, and printed significant speeches of the day, including those by Abraham Lincoln. Alongside Douglass’ own editorials appeared essays and commentary by leading black intellectuals on the experiences and agonies of the blacks.

The nation’s first Afro-American newspaper, *Freedom’s Journal*, originated in New York City on March 16th, 1827, in response to the continued and virulent attacks on blacks by the *New York Enquirer*, a white pro-slavery newspaper. Published by John B. Russwurm and Samuel Cornish, the weekly *Freedom’s Journal* launched the movement for an independent voice promoting Afro-American cultural pride, perspectives on current events, and the exchange of ideas among black readers and black intellectuals. Its pages debated the issue of whether blacks should strive for full citizenship and assimilation in America -- a view favoured by most Afro-Americans at the time or pursue separation and even resettlement in Africa, a position, known as the
colonization movement, held principally by whites. From its inception, Freedom’s Journal strived to be non-partisan in its support for the major political parties while scrupulously responsible in its journalism. Its editors believed that a black press was the best means of providing for the moral, religious, civic and literary improvement of the injured race that was daily murdered in the nation’s white press. The paper’s promising life was short-lived because of the rift in its editors over the issue of colonization. Cornish, a Presbyterian minister who organized the first Afro-Presbyterian congregation in New York, vehemently opposed colonization. Russwurm, who was born in Jamaica and being the nation’s second black college graduate, supported repatriation or the settlement of American blacks in Africa. Soon their differences proved insurmountable and Cornish left Freedom’s Journal for six months to assume duties at his church, during which time Russwurm turned the paper into a strong advocate of colonization, arguing that American blacks would never be accepted in America and that their only hope for dignity and true freedom was in leaving for Africa. He felt so strongly about colonization that he moved to Africa and the journal ended in 1829.

The most influential black newspaper published before the Civil War was the North Star, (1847-1851) founded and edited by Frederick Douglass on funds raised in England. It took its name from the polestar that guided the runaway slaves in traveling North for freedom. It began as an alternative to white abolitionist papers; principally William Lloyd Garrison’s the Liberator, differing with Garrison over the use of political means and even violence to end slavery. Printed weekly and presenting a staunchly antislavery stance, the paper nevertheless featured open dialogue about all
aspects of abolition and civil rights for blacks.

In a pamphlet introducing the paper, Douglass wrote that the object of the North Star was to attack slavery in all its forms and aspects; advocate universal emancipation; promote the moral and intellectual improvement of the coloured people; and to hasten the day of freedom to the three million enslaved fellow countrymen. Surprisingly, white readers were also attracted to the paper, and its white subscribers outnumbered blacks almost five to one at its peak. While Douglass billed the North Star as an antislavery journal, it was not anti-white in sentiment. He said that his efforts “resulted from no unworthy distrust or ungrateful want of appreciation of the zeal, integrity, or ability of the noble band of white labourers.” (McFeely 42)

Eventually in 1851, The North Star merged with the Liberty Party Paper, and was renamed Frederick Douglass’ Paper, which continued to be published until 1863.

Frederick Douglass was the most prominent black American in the nation in the 19th century. Born a slave, he taught himself to read and write, organized secret schools for slaves, and escaped from slavery by masquerading as a free black sailor traveling via train and steamboat from Baltimore in 1838. Thereafter, he made hundreds of speeches for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, often risking his life.

During the civil war, Douglass pressured Lincoln to allow blacks to fight in the union army, openly supported Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, and worked feverishly to recruit black troops and to pressure the federal government to end discrimination in the military. After the war, Douglass championed the cause of black equality and lobbied for the passage of the 15th Amendment, breaking with long-time supporters who refused to back the amendment because it did not include women’s
suffrage. Over the next twenty years, Douglass spoke out against the increasing violence in the Jim Crow South and the movement to disfranchise blacks. When asked shortly before his death in 1895 what advice he would give to a young black starting out in life, Douglass replied firmly, “Agitate! Agitate! Agitate! (Chronology on the History of Slavery and Racism)

Thomas Hamilton made his second attempt in the publishing business with the monthly Anglo-African Magazine and with a weekly newspaper, the Weekly Anglo-African (1859-1861). This paper was a companion piece to the monthly, and featured shorter articles and news coverage. Often compared to the North Star, because of the quality of its journalism, the paper dismissed the various schemes to settle blacks in separate states or in other countries. The paper, like the Monthly, featured essays on astronomy, recreation, insurrection and rebellion, intemperance, and religion, as well as poetry and passages from books. Thomas Hamilton died in 1861, and the paper was sold to James Redpath, an advocate of the migration of blacks to Haiti. It ceased publication, however, within the year.

The greatest contribution, however, came from the NAACP. The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) was formed as the direct result of the lynching of two blacks in Springfield in 1908. The incident produced a wide response by white Northerners to a call by Mary W. Ovington, a white woman, for a conference to discuss ways of achieving political and social equality for blacks. This conference led to the formation of the NAACP in 1910, headed by eight prominent Americans, seven white and one, W. E. B. DuBois, black. The selection of DuBois was significant; for he was a black who had rejected the policy of gradualism advocated by Booker T. Washington and demanded immediate
equality for blacks. From 1910 to 1934 DuBois was the editor of the association’s periodical *The Crisis*, which reported on race relations around the world. The new organization grew so rapidly that by 1915 it was able to organize a partially successful boycott of the motion picture “The Birth of a Nation,” which portrayed blacks of the reconstruction era in a distorted light.

At its formation, the NAACP adopted a militant program of action based on the platform of its radical forerunner, the Niagara Movement, demanding equal educational, political, and civil rights for blacks and the enforcement of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. The NAACP initially employed two basic methods in its protest philosophy -- the legal approach and public education. Relying on an integrated and middle-class approach to reform, the NAACP stressed corrective education, legislation, and litigation rather than more radical, disruptive protest. The first years of the NAACP were dedicated to the problems of mob violence and lynching. Between 1915 and 1936, under the leadership of Arthur B. Spingarn, white and black attorneys for the NAACP, including Moorfield Story, Louis Marshall, and Clarence Darrow, attacked four areas of injustice, suffrage, residential and segregation ordinances, restrictive covenants, and equal protection for Afro-Americans accused of crimes. The NAACP legal committee joined other organizations, such as the National Urban League (NUL), and won its first important victory before the U.S. Supreme Court, which overturned the amendment to Oklahoma’s state constitution that exempted from literacy tests those or the descendents of those who had been eligible to vote prior to 1st January 1867. Other states had enacted similar grandfather clauses, the clear intent of which was to deny blacks the right to vote.
During the post World War I period, the organization, led by its Afro-American executive secretary James Weldon Johnson, focused its attention on anti-lynching legislation. Although no federal anti-lynching bills were passed by Congress, in an age of increasing racism and the national rise to prominence of the Ku Klux Klan, the NAACP’s aggressive campaign heightened public awareness of and opposition to mob violence against blacks and firmly established the organization as the national spokesman for Afro-Americans.

Over the next three decades, the NAACP directed its attention to voting rights, housing, and the desegregation of public education. In the 1930s, under the leadership of Charles Houston, the NAACP prepared its first cases aimed at the soft underbelly of Jim Crow graduate schools. In 1935, NAACP lawyers Charles Houston and Thurgood Marshall won the legal battle to admit an Afro-American student, Donald Gaines Murray, to the University of Maryland Law School. Building on the strategy and issues used in the Murray case, the NAACP legal counsel finally argued its first case involving education and the ‘separate but equal’ doctrine before the Supreme Court in 1938. Although the court’s decision reaffirmed the doctrine that separate educational facilities were legal if equal, the road to the 1954 Brown decision had been paved.

Between 1940 and 1950, the NAACP fought in the courts in two areas, racial injustice in court procedures and discrimination in the voting process. The first case, involving a forced confession of a crime resulted in a setback for the NAACP legal team, but the second case resulted in banning the all-white primary in Texas. During World War II, the NAACP led the effort to ensure that President Franklin Roosevelt ordered a nondiscrimination policy in war-related industries and federal employment.
In 1946, the NAACP won a case which banned states from having laws that sanction segregated facilities in interstate travel by train and bus. The NAACP was also influential in pressuring President Harry Truman to sign the ‘executive order’ banning discrimination by the federal government and the “introduction of the domestic programme of reform known as the Fair deal.” (Longman 941)

With Thurgood Marshall as its special legal counsel, the NAACP figured prominently in a series of Supreme Court decisions that outlawed residential covenants against black homebuyers and ordered the integration of the University of Oklahoma and the University of Texas. These successful cases on higher education issues helped lead to the landmark case of May 1954, which finally declared segregated schools unequal and unconstitutional. The Brown decision marked the beginning of the end of the formal aspects of Jim Crow and ushered in a new and stormy course for race relations in the form of the civil rights movement. Although it worked with a variety of newly formed Afro-American-led groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the NAACP’s hegemony as the country’s major civil rights group was unchallenged.

After one of his many successful mass rallies for civil rights, the NAACP’s first field Director, Medgar Evers, was assassinated in front of his house in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1963; five months later, President John F. Kennedy was also assassinated, setting the course of the civil rights movement in a different direction, through legislative action. The NAACP achieved its goals by playing a leading role in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1957, which established the civil rights division of the Department of Justice and the Commission on Civil Rights. The NAACP worked for passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which not only forbade
discrimination in public places, but also established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).

As the NAACP entered the fourth quarter of the twentieth century, it remained an active force among Afro-Americans committed to racial integration, and it continued to work successfully to fight discrimination in housing and strengthen the penalties for violations of civil rights. The organization helped in the extension of Voting Rights Act of 1965 and led successful efforts in 1972 to increase the power of the EEOC. Under its executive secretary, Roy Wilkins, the NAACP had a membership of 433,118 in 1555 branches located in all the fifty states by 1975.

In 1982, the NAACP registered more than 850,000 voters, and its protests helped in preventing President Ronald Reagan from giving a tax waive to the racially segregated Bob Jones University. The NAACP led a massive antiapartheid rally in New York in 1985 and launched a campaign that helped in defeating the nomination of Judge Robert Bork to the Supreme Court in 1987. In 1996, Maryland congressman Kweisi Mfume left Congress and became the NAACP’s president. Even in the twenty-first century, the NAACP continues to follow its original goals of fighting social injustice to the Afro-Americans through legal and political actions for “equality before the law, freedom of speech and writing and of political activity and association.”

The need to study America and its history, especially the history of blacks, is important because is a continent that is enormous in area, rich in resources, peopled by men of exotic and diverse cultures. We study America because it is America, and also because it is more than America. To use the words of Malcolm Bradbury, “It has revealed to us much more that we need to understand about the nature of modern
ideas, modern process [and] modern experience.” (25) To study Langston Hughes without taking into account the history and the background of the blacks would tantamount to studying Hughes in vacuum.

Most of Hughes’s writing is based on the past history and the present predicament of the Negro. Yet, as remarked by Hughes himself, “I would hate to be a Negro writer depending on race to get somewhere.” (The American 41) Hughes has always given credit to the Negro people for their history and past credentials, but he has stamped this material with his own talent to make it come alive as literature. A writer of lesser skill would have merely incorporated racial details into a tasteless polemic but in Hughes’s case there has never been any need to substitute racial history for ability. By sheer ability Hughes has turned his individual experience as part of the community’s experience and it is for this reason that he expresses his own experience in relation to his community. This relational dimension of Hughes’s intent makes his aesthetics a pragmatist one. Hughes always felt that the primitive cultures were more conscious of life than modern Western cultures. It is for this reason that the first poetic phase of Hughes relies heavily on the historical Africa. History of the blacks has also governed the personality of Hughes in another way. The poet is never oblivious of his rich heritage and old glory and this fact keeps him away from the feeling of despair. The slow process of correcting racial misunderstanding angers him, but he never doubts the final victory of justice. The continuous struggle of his ancestors convinced him that every action ultimately contributes to the final outcome. The faith in the poet comes from the struggles and defiance that history books have recorded of the black race. The history of the blacks has taught two major things to the poet; first, it has
clarified to the Negroes what strength and dignity they possess and, second, it has also provided to the white audience an answer to the ambivalent feelings of the Negroes for what actually they want in their life. The second poetic phase of the poet is full of Marxist overtones and here also the understanding of the Marxism is vital to understand the experiences and thoughts of the poet. Langston Hughes as a poet is distinctly unique in his outpourings but to analyze and understand without taking into account the history of the blacks will be misguided and incomplete.