Chapter I

Introduction

The history of the African American literature consists of complicated transitions. Black Fiction was evolving in concentrated efforts by Black American writers to secure their constitutional rights as full citizens of the United States. They aimed to destroy the legal and extra legal barriers that excluded full participation of African Americans in their social and political lives. Among the themes and issues explored are the roles of African Americans within the larger American society, their culture, racism, slavery, and equality. African American writings have tended to incorporate oral forms, such as spirituals, sermons, gospel music, blues, or rap. As the African Americans’ place in American society has changed over the centuries, so, has the focus of African American literature. African American history predates the emergence of the United States as an independent country, and African American literature has similarly deep roots.

Beginning in the Pre- Revolutionary War period, African American writers have engaged in a creative, if often contentious, dialogue with American letters. The result is a literature rich in expressive subtlety and social insight, offering illuminating assessments of American identities and history. Since 1970 African American writers, led by Toni Morrison, have earned widespread critical acclaim, their works have been recognized internationally as well as nationally. African-born Phillis Wheatley, enslaved in Boston, dedicated her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773). It was the first African American book, to prove that Negros were not inherently inferior to whites in matters of the spirit. The first known African American novel *Clotel or The President’s Daughter* was published by the fugitive slave William Wells Brown in 1853. *Clotel* is a story about American miscegenation.
A genre of African American literature that developed in the middle of the 19th century is the slave narrative, accounts written by fugitive slaves about their lives in the South and often after escaping to freedom. They wanted to describe the cruelties of life under slavery, as well as the persistent humanity of the slaves as persons. At the time, the controversy over slavery led to impassioned literature on both sides of the issue, with novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe’s representing the abolitionist view of the evils of slavery. The tales written to inspire the abolitionist struggle are the most famous because they tend to have a strong autobiographical motif. Many of them are now recognized as the most literary of all 19th-century writings by African Americans, with two of the best-known being Frederick Douglass's autobiography and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Harriet Jacobs.

The desperate conditions of African Americans in the South that sparked the Great Migration of the early 20th century, combined with a growing African American community in the Northern United States, led to a movement to fight violence and discrimination against African Americans that crossed racial lines. The Civil Rights Movement from 1954 to 1968 was directed at abolishing racial discrimination against African Americans, particularly in the Southern United States. The large Migration of African Americans began during World War I, hitting in large numbers during World War II. During this Great Migration, Black people left racism and lack of opportunities in the American South and settled in Northern cities like Chicago, where they found work in factories and other sectors of the economy.

The Migration produced a new sense of independence in the Black community and contributed to the vibrant Black urban culture seen during the Harlem Renaissance. It also empowered the growing American Civil Rights movement, which made a powerful
impression on Black writers such as James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, W. E. B. Dubois, Toni Morrison and other African American women writers in general during the 1940s, ’50s and ’60s.

Just as the Black activists were pushing to end segregation and racism and create a new sense of Black Nationalism, so too were black authors attempting to address these issues with their writings. Black Writers such as Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks wrote about issues of racial segregation and Black Nationalism. They dealt with the issues of how Negro life in America operated to develop Negro personality. Negro culture in America found self consciousness and articulation leading the jargon of psychology and existentialism in African American fiction.

In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and its aftermath, the African American novel became a reminder that race was a political minefield and that culture found its origins in the interactions among Europe, Africa, and two Americas. Thus the novel became grounded within an apex of ideas about culture and cultural transmission and served up notions of human possibility. The African American novel was capable of representing the broadest of human concerns, and it could absorb multiple forms of expressive culture. The social mission of the novel bears a special relationship to the history of African Americans, its aesthetic significance lies in the rhetorical strategies and metaphorical language the author uses to reenact if not resolve the novel’s inherent tensions. At times these tensions appear in the form of conflicting literary tradition. For example, sentimentalism and realism in Frances Harper and Jessie Fauset; or gothicism and naturalism in Richard Wright and Gayle Jones.

At other times the novelists create dramatic tension by borrowing from African oral forms or traditional Western literary forms. Charles Chesnutt turns to the folktale;
Alice Walker, the epistolary novel and the female Bildungsroman; Charles Johnson and Sherley Anne Williams, the slave narrative; Margaret Walker, the folk novel; James Baldwin and Leon Forrest, the African American sermon; and Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray, the blues. The value placed on narrative’s closure differs markedly from novel to novel. Toni Morrison emphasizes the internationalization of those conflicts that shatter the sense of reality, making narrative closure difficult.

A seminal figure in black literature, Richard Wright has been called one of the most powerful and influential writers of twentieth century America. Richard Wright was one of the first writers to portray often in graphic, brutal accounts the dehumanizing effects of racism on blacks. Richard Nathaniel Wright (1908-1960) belonging to the Civil Rights Movement Era, was an African American author of sometimes controversial novels, short stories, poems, and non-fiction. Much of his literature concerns racial relations, especially those involving the plight of African Americans during the late 19th to mid-20th centuries in the United States.

Richard Wright was born on September 4, 1908 on a farm near Natchez, Mississippi. Wright’s childhood was harsh and filled with fear. His mother Ella Wilson Wright, was a former school teacher and his father, Nathan a sharecropper who drank heavily. The desertion of his father when Wright was only six years old, the constant move from one house, town or state to another, all these reflect the instability of his life. Poverty and illness were his family’s lot. Hunger, if counted the number of times the word appears in his autobiographical narrative, was a more constant companion than any playmate. His intellectual journey moved from Southern black expression of Christianity to dialectical materialism and hence to existentialism. He was deeply marked by an existentialist vision of life which he encountered in his childhood and adolescence,
compounded by painful poverty, his tyrannical religious maternal family, and the frustration of his own broken family.

From early 1920 until late 1925 Richard Wright lived with his maternal grandmother, Margaret Bolden Wilson, a fanatical Seventh Day Adventist mulatto in Jackson, Mississippi. Early strife with his aunt Addie and grandmother left him with a permanent, uncompromising hostility toward religious solutions to everyday problems. In 1923, Wright excelled in grade school and was made class valedictorian of Smith Robertson junior high school. Determined not to be called an Uncle Tom, he refused to deliver the principal’s carefully prepared valedictory address that would not offend the white school officials, and finally convinced the black administrators to let him add a compromised version of what he had written. In September that year, Wright registered for tenth grade at the New Lanier High School in Jackson, but he quickly dropped out, convinced that the educational system had taught him nothing. After a few brief menial jobs in Jackson he moved to Memphis before the end of the year. His childhood in Memphis and Mississippi shaped his lasting impressions of American racism. In 1924, at the age of 15, his first adventure story, “The Voodoo of Hell’s Half-Acre” was published in the Southern Register, a local black newspaper.

Wright moved to Chicago in 1927. He began reading literature and was especially impressed by H. L. Mencken’s essays. After securing employment as a postal clerk, he read other writers and studied their styles during his time off. When his job at the post office was eliminated, he was forced to go on relief in 1931. In 1932, he began attending meetings of the John Reed Club. As the club was dominated by the Communist Party, Wright established a relationship with a number of party members. Especially interested in the literary contacts made at the meetings, Wright formally joined the Communist Party in late 1933. As a revolutionary poet he has written numerous proletarian poems

A power struggle within the Chicago chapter of the John Reed Club led to the dissolution of the club’s leadership; Wright was told he had the support of the club’s party members if he was willing to join the party. By 1935, Wright had completed his first novel, *Cesspool*, which was published posthumously as *Lawd Today* (1963), and in January 1936 his story “Big Boy Leaves Home” was accepted for publication in the *New Caravan*. In February, he began working with the National Negro Congress, and in April he chaired the South Side Writers’ Group, whose membership included Arna Bontemps and Margaret Walker. Wright submitted some of his critical essays and poetry to the group for criticism and read aloud some of his short stories. Through the club, he edited *Left Front*, a magazine that the Communist Party shut down in 1937, despite Wright’s repeated protests. Throughout this period, Wright also contributed to *The New Masses* magazine.

While he was at first pleased by positive relations with white Communists in Chicago, he was later humiliated in New York City by some who rescinded an offer to find housing for Wright because of his race. Some black Communists denounced Wright as a bourgeois intellectual. However, he was largely autodidactic, having been forced to end his public education after the completion of grammar school. In 1937, Richard Wright moved to New York, where he forged new ties with Communist Party members. He worked on the WPA Writers’ Project guidebook to the city, *New York Panorama* (1938), and wrote the book’s essay on Harlem. Wright became the Harlem editor of the *Daily Worker*. In the summer and fall he wrote over two hundred articles for the *Daily Worker* and helped edit a short lived literary quarterly, *New Challenge*. The
year was also a landmark for Wright because he met and developed a friendship with Ralph Ellison that would last for years.

Wright gained national attention for the collection of four short stories entitled *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938). This book won him a literary prize from the *Story Magazine*. The publication and favourable reception of *Uncle Tom's Children* improved Wright’s status with the Communist party. Excellent sales of the above collection enabled him to establish a measure of financial independence for the first time. He was awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship in 1939, which allowed him to complete *Native Son*. He was appointed to the editorial board of *New Masses*, and Granville Hicks, prominent literary critic and Communist sympathizer, introduced him at leftist teas in Boston. He married Rose Dhima Meadman, a white classical dancer, with Ralph Ellison as his best man.

*Native Son* saw its publication in 1940, for the first time this African American novel was chosen by The Book-of-the-Month Club as its March selection. It ensured for Wright large sales and more publicity than ever before. Wright was criticized for his works’ concentration on violence. In the case of *Native Son* (1940), people complained that he portrayed the black man in ways that seemed to confirm the whites’ worst fears.

The period following the publication of *Native Son* was a busy time for Wright. In July 1940 he went to Chicago for conducting a research on the folk history of blacks with relevant photographs selected by Edwin Rosskam. While in Chicago he visited the American Negro Exhibition with Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps and Claude McKay.

In 1941 Wright divorced Dhima, and married Ellen Poplar, a white Communist Party organizer from Brooklyn. He then went to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where he and Paul Green collaborated on a dramatic version of *Native Son*. *Native Son* opened on Broadway, with Orson Welles as director, to generally favourable reviews in March
1941. On the strength of his novel the NAACP awarded Wright its Spingarn Medal for noteworthy achievement by a Negro. A volume of photographs almost completely drawn from the files of the Farm Security Administration, with text by Wright, *Twelve Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States*, was published in October 1941 to wide critical acclaim.

In 1942 Wright breaks with the Communist Party and his withdrawal was not made public until 1944. Later he published a two part article in the *Atlantic Monthly*, “*I Tried To Be a Communist*”. Wright's semi autobiographical *Black Boy* (1945) described his early life from Roxie through his move to Chicago. *American Hunger*, published posthumously in 1977, was originally intended as the second volume of *Black Boy*. The Library of America edition restored it to that form.

There was never any doubt of the unity of feeling between Wright’s living and writing. Even reviewers who felt he disparaged blacks collectively in his books attributed the cause to his personal responses to racial discrimination. Regardless of his considerable popular and critical success as an author, it was unlikely he could ever be comfortable contending with subtle and overt racism. For that reason he was eager to travel for brief, if not permanent, escape from American racial practices. The opportunity came in 1946 following an exchange of correspondence with Gertrude Stein whose book *Wars I Have Seen* he had reviewed. Stein had seen a copy of the review and a friendship by mail developed. She urged him to bring his wife and daughter for a stay in France.

In May 1946 the Wrights left for an eight month visit to Paris and England. During that time Wright met George Padmore, the Pan African intellectual, and many of the French writers who had been impressed by his books. Wrights attraction of European life, full of intellectual stimulation of the sort he had once found in the John Reed Club
and freedom from the day to day demands of racial “Ethics of Living Jim Crow,” became so great that shortly after returning to the United States, the Wrights made plans to go abroad permanently. The self imposed exile that began in July 1947 was to last until Wright's death in 1960, a period of creativity for Wright longer than that in his native land. During those years he prepared and published eight of his books.

During Wright’s exile in Paris as a permanent American expatriate, he became friends with Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. After becoming a French citizen in 1947, Wright continued to travel through Europe, Asia, and Africa. During his travels he associated with the poets and novelists of the Negritude movement, including Leopold Senghor and Aime Cesaire, with whom he founded Presence Africaine, which enabled Wright to see the social and psychological effects of material oppression in global perspective. These experiences were the basis of his numerous nonfictional works.

In 1949, Wright contributed to the anti-communist anthology The God That Failed; his essay had been published in the Atlantic Monthly three years earlier and was derived from the unpublished portion of Black Boy. In 1950, Wright at the age of 42, starred as the teenager Bigger Thomas in an Argentinian film version of Native Son. Despite this prodigious output during the 1950’s critics generally agree that Wright’s career as serious literary artist ended in 1946, when he left United States. They argue that while France liberated Wright as a person, it shackled his creative expression, dulling the vivid memories of his childhood and early life.

There has been much critical debate about the effect of exile on Wright's fiction, but the sojourn in Europe was without doubt invigorating to him as a person. Almost at once he found a place for himself with the African artists working in Paris for liberation from colonialism and discovered his affinity with the outlook of the Parisian
existentialists. An existentialist outlook had been latent in *Black Boy* and “Early Days in Chicago,” and overt in “The Man Who Lived Underground.” In 1952, he began to work diligently on the novel that was to be published as *The Outsider*.

Wright’s Existentialist phase was depicted in his second novel, *The Outsider* (1953), which described an African American character's involvement with the Communist Party in New York. He also was friends with fellow expatriate writers like Chester Himes and James Baldwin, although the relationship with the latter ended in acrimony after Baldwin published his essay *Everybody's Protest Novel* (collected in *Notes of a Native Son*), in which he criticized Wright's stereotypical portrayal of Bigger Thomas. In 1954 Wright published a minor novel, *Savage Holiday*.

Wright’s book on his journey, *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* (1954) recalls his visit to Takoradi, a British colony in Africa. He travelled to the Gold Coast, where Kwame Nkrumah was leading the country to independence from the British rule. In *The Color Curtain: A report on the Bandung Conference* (1956), he visited Indonesia and presented his reflections on the conference by the free nations of the Third World. Several Indonesian artists and intellectuals that Wright met later offered commentary the way Wright depicted Indonesian cultural conditions in his travel writing. *Pagan Spain* (1957) recounts Wright’s bitterness over the poverty and corruption he observed while travelling in Spain, and *White Man, Listen!* (1957) contains four lectures by Wright on race relations.

Wright’s novel *The Long Dream* (1958); and his collection of short stories, *Eight Men* were published in 1961, shortly after his death. His works primarily dealt with the poverty, anger, and protests of northern and southern urban black Americans. His agent, Paul Reynolds, sent overwhelmingly negative criticism of Wright's four hundred page "Island of Hallucinations" manuscript in February 1959. Despite that, in March Wright
Outlined a novel in which Fishbelly was to be liberated from his racial conditioning and become a dominating character. By May 1959, Wright wanted to leave Paris and live in London. He felt French politics had become increasingly submissive to American pressure. The peaceful Parisian atmosphere he had enjoyed had been shattered by quarrels and attacks instigated by enemies of the expatriate black writers.

On June 26, 1959, marked the French publication, *White Man, Listen!* In June 1960, Wright recorded a series of discussions for French radio dealing primarily with his books and literary career. He also covered the racial situation in the United States and the world, and specifically denounced American policy in Africa. In spite of his financial straits, Wright refused to compromise his principles. He declined to participate in a series of programs for Canadian radio because he suspected American control. For the same reason, Wright rejected an invitation from the Congress for Cultural Freedom to go to India to speak at a conference in memory of Leo Tolstoy. Still interested in literature, Wright helped Kyle Onstott get *Mandingo* (1957) published in France.

His last display of explosive energy occurred on November 8, 1960, in his polemical lecture, “The Situation of the Black Artist and Intellectual in the United States”, delivered to students and members of the American Church in Paris. Wright argued that American society reduced the most militant members of the black community to slaves whenever they wanted to question the racial status quo. He offered as proof the subversive attacks of the Communists against *Native Son* and the quarrels which James Baldwin and other authors sought with him. On November 26, 1960, Wright talked enthusiastically about *Daddy Goodness* with Langston Hughes and gave him the manuscript.

After Wright visited Africa in 1957, despite various treatments, his health deteriorated over the next three years. He died in Paris on November 28, 1960 of a heart
attack at the age of 52. He was interred in Le Pere Lachaise Cemetery. A number of Wright’s works have been published posthumously. In 1991, unexpurgated versions of Native Son, Black Boy, and his other works were published. In addition, in 1994, his novella Rite of Passage was published for the first time. In the last years of his life, Wright became enamoured with the haiku and wrote over 4,000 such poems. In 1998 a book was published (Haiku: This Other World) with 817 of his own favourite haikus. Many of these haikus still maintain an uplifting quality even as they deal with coming to terms with loneliness, death, and the forces of nature.

A collection of Wright's travel writings was published by the Mississippi University Press in 2001. At his death, Wright left an unfinished book, A Father's Law. It deals with a black policeman and the son he suspects of murder. Wright's daughter Julia Wright published A Father's Law in January 2008. An omnibus edition containing Wright's political works was published under the title Three Books from Exile: Black Power; The Color Curtain; and White Man, Listen!

Richard Wright was one of the first Afro-American writers to have prepared and nourished the ground for the fiction of social protest. More than any other writer of his period, he helped in inserting a great consciousness in the blacks and the whites as well. His life was dominated by a set of ideas and philosophies that he personally embraced and then weaved them into his writings. He temporarily followed various – isms – communism, Black Nationalism, existentialism, he regarded each system as valid only so long as it freed him to grapple on his own terms with the vast unclassifiable welter of experience. Wright’s works focuses on his insistence on the sanctity of the individual imagination, but this insistence is tempered by his vision of the black people’s collective destiny. In the “Blue Print for Negro Writing” he has left his example, his challenge:
The Negro writer . . . has a serious responsibility. In order to do justice to his subject matter, in order to depict Negro life in all of its manifold and intricate relationships, a deep, informed and complex consciousness is necessary: a consciousness which draws for its strength upon the fluid lore of a great people, and molds this lore with the concepts that move and direct the forces of history today. ("Blue Print for Negro Writing" 32)

The aim of Marxism is to bring about a classless society, based on the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. Karl Marx (1818-1883), a German philosopher, and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), a German sociologist, were the joint founders of this school of thought. They called their economic theories "Communism", designating their belief in the state ownership of industry, transport, etc rather than private ownership. Marx and Engels announced the advent of Communism in their jointly written Communist Manifesto of 1848. Other philosophies merely seek to understand the world, whereas Marxism seeks to change it. Marxism sees progress as coming about through the struggle for power between different social classes. The exploitation of one social class by another is seen especially in modern industrial capitalism. The result of this exploitation is alienation.

Literature and culture according to Marxism, can occur only within this scheme or structure, this layout of class relations. And what literature and culture say and how they say it will largely be shaped or determined by that layout. Marxist literary criticism has traditionally been concerned with studying the embeddedness of a work within its historical, social and economic contexts. Terry Eagleton and Catherine Belsey, are prominent British critics. Terry Eagleton suggests that in language, shared definitions had regularities of grammar and content, both reflect and help to constitute, a well-ordered political state. Catherine Belsey argues that the form of the realist novel contains implicit
validation of the existing social structure. The traditional Marxist criticism tends to deal with history in a fairly generalized way. It talks about conflicts between social classes, and clashes of large historical forces.

Current Marxist theory is interested in examining the subtle ways by which society works. From 1960’s onwards, there is a departure from traditional Marxism, which always relied on a single source for examining social phenomena. It is seen more and more, as a growing and evolving historical process. The power of ideology is seen to be far greater than the power of the material. And so literature has its own justification for existence. Marxist critics are interested in examining human behaviour as a product of ideological forces transmitted through arts, and other institutions. A literary work might reinforce or critique the ideologies it represents or encloses. Both content and form are involved in this practice. Marxism has special affinities with the real world as it is, without any deliberate distortion. Marxian critics do not fancy much the experimental mode that keeps the common readers away from it. Marxist criticism is necessarily sociological.

African Marxist criticism has concentrated on the ideological critique of literature. This critique of the social-world-outlook of African writers is founded on a firm sociology of the exploiting capitalist essence of the colonial social order. This critique of the history of the new literature reveals that it is the colonial social order that constituted its concrete parameters. Marxist criticism is therefore predicted on the practical necessity of anti-colonial revolution which is anti-imperialist and prospectively socialist.

Richard Wright’s attraction towards Marxist ideology and communism is perceived from his *Uncle Tom’s Children* to *Native Son*. And then the downward movement is reflected in the rejection of the Party as depicted in *The Outsider*. His
devotion to Marxist principles was unflagging and his Marxist orientation surfaces when he portrays the poor and the oppressed blacks, struggling and putting up a brave fight against the capitalist exploitation and victimization.

Wright seriously read Kierkegaard and studied Nietzsche. He further adventured into the works of Existentialist philosophers like Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. Nonetheless, Wright was in the realistic tradition of Fyodor Dostoevsky. He constantly tried to represent reality so intensely that his characters, situations, actions appeared to transcend reality. Wright keenly felt, as all his fiction reveals, that in the interracial social relations, in both the North and the South ultimately, race was an omnipresent factor.

Existentialism is a term applied to a group of attitudes current in philosophical, religious, artistic thought during and after World War II, which emphasizes Existence rather than essence. In its modern expression, Existentialism had its beginning in the writings of the 19th century Danish theologian, Soren Aabye Kierkegaard for whom Existence is a perpetual relationship developed by the combinations of spirit-soul body, temporal -eternal, liberty-necessity. The Existentialists’ point of departure is the immediate sense of awareness that human beings have of their situation; a part of this awareness is the sense they have of their absurdity of the outer world. This contradiction produces in them a discomfort, an anxiety in the face of human limitations and a desire to invest experience with meaning by acting upon the world, although efforts to act in a meaningless, absurd world lead to anguish, greater loneliness and despair.

During the last half of the nineteenth century, the German philosopher Frederick Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God. He used the term nihilism to designate the morbid crisis falling upon the modern world. In the early twentieth century, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger tried a metaphysical approach of Existentialism. The
description he made of human existence is all the more pessimistic since he reveals to man the fictitious and derelict nature of the world as it is. It is up to man to create values out of that chaos.

All the philosophies of Existence tried to put stress on the unyielding nature of human Existence which had its special echo during the Second World War period. The war period was one of chaos and pessimism, and the collapse of absolute values, had put an end to man’s optimism about his destiny. Even before the term Existentialism was broadly used, the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre started his satire of contemporary optimism. He was influenced by German phenomenologist like Karl Jaspers, made remarkable beginnings with *Nausea* (1938) and a collection of short stories *The Wall* (1939); those two works which were excellent testimonies about the anguish of the pre-war periods. Albert Camus’s *The Stranger* (1942) and his treatise *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1943) are two images of negation and absurdity.

Simone de Beauvoir published her first novel *The Guest* in 1943, another metaphysical novel which dramatizes in an Existential way the problem of individual communication. By 1945’s Existentialism changed its first phase of despair and negation of universal values to become a doctrine open to hope and expectation. During a conference held in 1945, Sartre announced that Existentialism is humanism. With its second phase, Existentialism turned on man’s effort to create positive values in society, and therefore appeared as the hope of the desperate. *The Plague* by Albert Camus and the trilogy *Strides toward Freedom* by Jean Paul Sartre try to express through allegorical forms the new humanism which refuses to shrink before historical catastrophes.

African American writers expressed their concerns, anxieties and anguishes in their writings. They had a quest for their Existential identity, for their visibility. They
excavated their long, forgotten past, in order to trace the fossils of their forefather’s

Existence and also visualize their future. Their literature was indeed a creative effort to

find the real essence of their heritage. As a voice of Africans in America, Richard

Wright’s contribution to Black writing was noteworthy. It is rightly said by a well known
critic Arnold Rampersad that, “Among African American writers he is perceived
certainly as one of the land- mark authors in the two-hundred-year history of the

literature” (1-2).

As Wright matured and began to understand his circumstances as a black person

in Mississippi in the early twentieth century, he came to know the fear and dread

associated with Racism and its narrow circumscription of black lives. He was frequently

aware of the possibility of being killed or otherwise injured because of anything he might

or might not say or do if that might inadvertently violate the “Ethics of Living Jim

crow.” The most frequent mood in his early life was tension, if not the tension arising

from direct contact with whites, then tension resulting from the pressures brought to bear

on African Americans stemming from the Racial climate. Wright made abundantly clear

that the most intimate interactions among African Americans were largely influenced by

the pervasive impact of Race. Wright keenly felt, as all his fiction reveals, that in

interracial social relations, in both North and South ultimately, race was an omnipresent

factor.

Even Wright’s articulate Negroes appear dumb, for if they possess the vocabulary,

they have been trained to conceal their emotions from whites and from other blacks,

through the indoctrination of “Ethics of Living Jim Crow” among the blacks young and

old. The absence of freedom provokes Wright’s rebels to attack family and friends,
sometimes in self-defence, sometimes in anger and hatred. Black Boy serves as a partial
model for Wright’s other works in which protagonists reflect their brutal environment. Fights at Negro schools and in black neighbourhoods were more common than the interracial battle described in “Ethics of Living Jim Crow.” Unlike his characters, Wright did not enjoy such encounters and only participated to protect his life and maintain his honour.

Wright blamed whites for pitting blacks against each other. Similar to the famous episode in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, Wright accuses whites of manipulating and controlling black behaviour and emotions of destroying Negro fellowship. “The shame and anger we felt,” he writes in Black Boy, “for having allowed ourselves to be duped crept into our blows. . . The hate we felt for the man. . . went into the blows we threw at each other”(243). Such displaced rage wraps most black friendships. Beneath the superficial camaraderie seethes hostility and suspicion. By first attacking less formidable black targets, Wright’s protagonists are emboldened to assail white oppressors. Such internecine warfare becomes inevitable when self hatred flourishes and frustration has no outlet.

All his life, Richard Wright refused to comply with the whites’ expectations of him; he rebelled intellectually and managed, after moving to France, to lead a fairly normal, rewarding life. Black Boy recounts Wright’s early initiation, his struggles within himself, his black neighbours, his frightened, highly religious family, and most importantly his struggle with the white world. In addition to his feeling of loneliness among other blacks, Wright had also experienced dread of whites by the time he was ten years old. Although he had never been personally abused by whites at this age, he nonetheless knew their capacity for hateful acts, when his friend’s brother is murdered, it affects him deeply. Whereas Wright says he condemns the blacks for lacking traditions
and kindness, he nevertheless empathizes thoroughly with the experiences of his race, blaming the whites for the Negroes’ shortcomings since they have refused his people the full benefits of Western culture. Wright identifies with the most debased of blacks; his novels give them strong voices to protest against their condition.

Richard Wright’s *Uncle Tom’s Children* is a bitter protest against racial injustice. The title comes from the expression of the Negroes indicating that they are no longer Uncle Toms. *Uncle Tom’s Children* originally contained four lengthy stories: “Big Boy Leaves Home”, “Down by the Riverside”, “Long Black Song” and “Fire and Cloud”. Wright published an expanded edition of *Uncle Tom’s Children* in 1940 which included a nonfiction introductory essay, “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” and concluded with the story of “Bright and Morning Star”. The book is unified by the stories’ shared social context of common themes and consistent narrative technique. It is made coherent by an arrangement that leads each of the protagonists towards increasingly sophisticated examples of self realization.

“The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” describes Wright’s own experiences of growing up and follows his experiences of being black in the South through his adolescences and adulthood. Wright broke with the Communist Party and his works express his belief in Marxist theories of economic determinism and in the efficiency of collective action. It is most obvious in “Fire and Cloud”, which concludes with a triumphant, though improbable, interracial protest march lead by Rev. Taylor. “Bright and Morning Star”, idealizes the personal sacrifices made by Aunt Sue. His stories demonstrate the deterministic influence of social and economic conditions and the futility of an individual’s effort to rebel unless it is a part of a collective action. The stories also display Wright’s intuitive belief in Black Nationalism.
“Big Boy Leaves Home”, is a harrowing story which tells of a black adolescent Big Boy who is forced to shoot a white man in self defence after he watches his friend being lynched, burnt alive and mutilated. The symbol of the North stands for freedom and equal rights, Big Boy’s escape to the North was affected through the will of the whole oppressed Negro community. This informs the very essence of a developing social vision in all the stories of this collection.

In moving from individual consciousness to group consciousness of the protagonist, Mann becomes a vehicle for Wright’s Marxism in “Down by the Riverside”. And it is in this development in Mann’s nature like Bigger Thomas Wright brings out how the actions of his characters speak for themselves. Mann represents a force of the brotherhood of everyman; as such, this force denies artificial barriers of race and colour. And in doing so it falls within the ambience of Marxist thought.

In the final two stories of the collection “Fire and Cloud” and “Bright and Morning Star” Wright weaves Marxism and the Communist Party into the very fabric of his tales. In “Fire and Cloud” he uses the Great Depression as commentary enough upon the failure of capitalism. When food and relief are cut off from the Negro community by the white authorities, Wright says as much about the faults of an economic system as he does about the social cruelty and injustice. The concept of militant and faithful sacrifice by urban workers is depicted better by Wright in “Bright and Morning Star” than any of his other stories. So strongly Wright himself feels that the story is more about Marxism than about Negro white relations.

Richard Wright’s *Eight Men* (1961) is founded on racism based on colour discrimination. The suffering of Black people in the white community is the predominant idea in *Eight Men*, which is a collection of eight short stories. Each story has a different
form of racism like search for identity, accusation because of colour, poverty and slavery. At its depth, this collection is full of the racial slurs that an average black had to bear in post 1930’s. Everything was black at that time black parlours, black restaurant, black schools and colleges. Despite all the oppression the book narrates semi fictional tales of the rise of these eight people. Each story in the Eight Men centres on a Negro, involved cruelly with his surroundings beaten down by them, each central figure is in one way or another is misunderstood by the world he knows. Altogether the eight men of these stories have in common a desperate qualified heroism. Which Wright has portrayed in his characters realistically.

“The Man Who Saw the Flood,” the first of the stories in Eight Men, deals with a tenant farm family of three Tom, May and their daughter Sally who return to their devastated home after a flood. “The Man Who Was Almost a Man” tells the story of sixteen year old Dave who works for Mr. Hawkins, he accidentally shoots Mr. Hawkins’ mule with his gun. In order to pay for the dead animal he must work for two years. This drives him to jump aboard a passing train travelling North, his gun still securely in his pocket.

“The Man Lived Underground” Fred Daniels, a Negro, is in flight from the police who have falsely accused him of murder, descends through a manhole on the street in to a sewer. When he wants to return to the outer world one of the policemen shoots him, he is swept away dead in the waters that flow below the city. “The Man Who Went to Chicago” here Wright has chosen to depict himself living literally in an underground situation as a hospital attendant. One of his menial tasks is to feed caged animals on whom certain experimental inoculations were being performed.
“The Man Who Killed a Shadow” is a story, which in some ways resembles Native Son, deals with Saul Saunders who inadvertently kills a white woman. The woman in this case is a forty year old, sexually repressed, white librarian who commands the Negro to look at her legs. “Man of All Work,” deals with a Negro man, Carl who informs his wife Lucy that their situation is so desperate that he intends to dress himself in his wife’s clothes and seek employment as a maid with the Fairchilds. Carl disguised as a maid is sexually assaulted by Mr. Fairchild, in turn Carl physically attacks him.

The story “Man, God Ain’t Like That...” opens with a description of a journey an English painter, John and his wife are making through the back country of the Ashanti. They adopt as their servant a Ashanti boy, Babu. John regards Babu as an amusing curiosity and takes him with him to Paris. Babu is convinced that John is Christ, kills John, to achieve a magnificent civilization. The entire story of “Big Black Good Man” is told in terms of an old white night porter, Olaf, of a cheap hotel. He is filled with terror and hatred for an enormous black seaman, who stays there for six days. A year later the same Negro returns and presents him with six silk shirts. Olaf confesses his fear to the good natured Negro.

Wright novel’s gave unusual power to his personal responses of the black man’s segregation in America. Wright through his characters reintegrates the excluded black man into the mainstream, thereby creating his own values out of the hostile and anarchic forces that the black man found about him. Regardless of his considerable popular and critical success his works profess that Wright could never be comfortable with subtle and overt racism in America. There was never any doubt of the unity of feeling between Wright’s living and writing. The social criticism that emerges from his works, invites the reader to consider Wright mostly as a victim of racial discrimination in its violent and subtle manifestations. Wright is determined to surmount barriers of racial prejudice and
Jim Crow Laws. His public career also exemplified him as a spokesman for the American blacks and later for the Third World People whose collective experience in history he understood through analogy with his own personal life. The indictment of white racism had converted the invisible black man into a social rebel, who voluntarily encounters death with self-realization, than to be a passive victim.

Wright focuses on the existential agony of migrant Negroes who fled from the feudal South to the urban, industrialized North with possibilities of freedom. In the course of the black man’s life, festered with alienation, dread, anxiety, despair and fear, crime appears inevitable. Wright explicitly shows how all society, white and black, has a stake in the black man’s crime, he is not alone. The significant aspect of this thesis is Wright’s probing into larger issues of life than racial exclusion and social inequality. He presents situations regarding the ultimate nature of man. All his characters freely exercise their will, despite the consequences to fight with dignity and die individually, or to oppose morally and win collectively, for their rights. His mission as a proletarian writer is expressed strongly in “Blueprint for Negro Writing”, the specific racial dimensions of the oppressed working class. Wright assumed that the black writers and intellectuals had the responsibility of creating the ideological and symbolical means through which a black mass movement could emerge. The relevance of Wright’s significance in the history of American letters will be seen when unmemorable thousands of Negro for the first time see their destiny in public print. Freed here of fear and the threat of violence, their lives have at last been organized, scaled down to controllable proportions.

The following literature review gives a better perspective and supports the thesis. C. James Trotman’s volume Richard Wright: Myths and Realities represents twelve contemporary and fresh responses to the works of Richard Wright. The collection includes several discussions on Native Son, Wright’s best known novel, the short fiction,
particularly the works from *Uncle Tom’s Children*, and journalistic writings. The articles derive positive correlations such as the individual experiences and social orders, the different realities perceived and circumstances contrived, eternal truth and existential encounters.

*The art of Richard Wright* is a book by Edward Margolies. It is purely an expository study of Wright’s entire career as man and writer. Edward Margolies notes Wright’s merits as well the defects, as he traces Wright’s thought processes and the general philosophies. This book offers an unusual experience as it presents an exceptionally clear picture of Wright, as he would like to be understood.

Michel Fabre *The World of Richard Wright* is a compilation of his essays written over the last two decades on the work and career of Richard Wright. Michel Fabre has tried to examine Wright’s work within the American and European ideological and literary context whether they deal with naturalism, existentialism, Marxism and nationalism. Michel Fabre explores the challenging individual expression of Wright, whose tension and protest were the well springs of his creativity. In each of the 12 essays he has tried to provide new perspectives of higher personal and cultural knowledge.

David Bakish in his book *Richard Wright* draws the chronology of Wright’s life, physical, emotional academic and literary growth up to his raise as an international activist. It is a clear cut periodical report of Wright’s personal life and career. It is the painting of an epic canvass where people of significance come and go, events happen that shape Wright’s sensibilities convictions the discriminations he suffers from, the struggles which he over comes to become the man he is. It is portrayed with a firm and convincing stroke.
Michel Fabre in his book *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* gives a comprehensive and sensitive picture of Wright’s life and his career. The evolution of Wright’s literary and political perspectives presents his use of literature and later, use of politics as a means of personal survival. Michel Fabre advocates that one should judge Wright’s work as a whole, not separating his writing from his ideological framework. It is only by respecting this unity in its ideological, racial and historical context that Wright’s importance can be fairly evaluated.

Margret Walker in her book *Daemonic Genius*, has followed a general outline of relating each period of his life dominated by a set of ideas and philosophies, that he personally embraced and then inculcated in his writing. Margret Walker attempts to define Wright, to analyse and assess his works and to show the correlation between the man and his work. She has effortlessly reinstated Wright’s place amidst the confusion of race and politics and racist literary history and criticism so evident in the twentieth century, literature. Her book is a testimony to Wright’s exciting and new unyielding ways of looking at the modern world.

Eugene E.Miller in his book *Voice of a Native Son* explores the development in Afro-American literature since the Civil War, that deal as directly as possible with black American life, physical, emotional, psychological as it actually is, the very consciousness of black Americans. The Black Aesthetic of the 1960’s and early 1970’s, and the 1980’s point out the emerging theorists of what black American writers have long been working towards. Richard Wright is in the midst of these cultures and quest. A more common view of Wright as an artist and literary theorist is found in both his published writings and more significantly in his unpublished essay “Personalism” written in 1935. It contains a number of ideas about artistic expression that were to recur in all his works.
Katherine Fishburn in her book *Richard Wright’s Hero: The Faces of Rebel-Victim* primarily examines several recurring themes and topics which unify his work. Wright’s interest and use of Marxism and existentialism, in his early works, is seen even before these ideologies came into existence as philosophical schools. The black man’s search for self-hood, the white democracy which sidelined and alienated the black man is also presented in the book. Katherine Fishburn presents Wright’s archetypal hero who calls for a dedicated study of his environment which converts him into a rebel-victim who stands in need of universal justice. The sources helpful in studying Wright’s hero are his experiences speeches, essays, fiction as well as non-fiction. Other sources useful in understanding Wright’s thinking are his political associations and proletarian influences.

*Bloom’s Modern Critical Views* on Richard Wright has reprinted ten essays which rely upon criteria that is not aesthetic. Richard Wright found inspiration for his novels from a variety of sources. Exploring African American Subject under systematic racial violence Wright links individual rebellion to the psychosocial development of the African American male. Wright carried with him local relationships and materials that his imagination ultimately turned into lessons for humanity. Bloom presents Wright as a representative African Americans and Southern writer who offer multiple perspectives on America’s regional and racial divides.

Evelyn Gross Avery in her book *Rebels and Victims* discusses the fiction of Richard Wright and Bernard Malamud which focuses on the marginal man who dominates the post World War II novels. Richard Wright’s and Bernard Malamud’s protagonists are alienated from society and values. The distinction between the rebel and the victim is not in their suffering, but in their responses to it. This study focuses on the
fact that the rebels and victims begin as outsiders, the rebels fulfil themselves through violence and the victims by suffering and self sacrifice.

This present thesis examines the nature of exclusion experienced by the black people in the American society. *Native Son* and *Black Boy* are powerful denunciation of the racial discriminations and social and economic pressures which condition the lives of Negroes. The capitalist America deliberately robs the Negro community and holds them in subjugation in South sides and Harlems under appalling conditions of misery and discrimination of childhood and adulthood without opportunity, of blocking the main social highway and of forced detours to criminal by ways. Bigger Thomas is the product of the special and bitter national oppression and again and again he finds himself caught in its web. Bigger battles against a slum rat; it is symbolic of the capitalist monster which devours the Negro people with peculiar relish. When Bigger wants to join the army the Jim Crow Army would use a black man only to dig ditches and to wash dishes and scrub floors in navy. Bigger breaks the law because the white folks have everything and go everywhere. They did not let them do anything. It is a hostile world for them. So Bigger suspected deception in any hint of friendship and he disliked political pity. Wright gives a psychological probing of the consciousness of the outcast, the disinherited, the generation lost in the slum jungle of American civilization.

Cross Damon of *The Outsider* is an outsider not only by his black skin in the American society but also by his unconventional convictions about life and everything about society itself. He is convinced that existence was meaningless, that society had no moral claims upon him, that there were no divine or traditional or logical laws that applied to him and that life was an incomprehensible disaster and human beings were nothing in particular. He could kill instinctively to satisfy a passing whim because there was nothing that could deter him from his criminal act. Alienation of a black man
especially in white America became pronounced and the Negroes will have to experience a double vision if they are to be both inside and outside of American culture at the same time.

The tale of Fishbelly and his father Tyree Tucker in *The Long Dream* proclaims that it is impossible to be a successful and sensitive Southern Negro. Tyree was a successful owner of brothel and a mortician because he was cringing and grimacing to the whites. The whites cannot tolerate thoughts of rebellion but only grinning and crying. The coloured man must bend, migrate elsewhere or break since there is only a white law. White women can tease but they may never be touched; the police may be used but they can never be treated as equals. Flight is the best answer to injustice, and above all, a black man’s dream can never come true. Tyree was killed and Fishbelly was jailed on fabricated charges to prevent an expose of the corrupt ties, Fishbelly renounces his father’s business and escapes to France. This white American backdrop rankles in a black man’s breast a burning resentment against the white race which seems to thwart his ambitions at every turn and keep him in abject poverty. This dissertation makes a detailed study of the black people who remain excluded from the main stream of American life which put them in almost chronic neurosis resulting in disparate reaction to the white civilization.

Chapter II “Exclusion of the Blacks in a White World: A Journey towards Manhood and Freedom”, considers *Black Boy* and *The Long Dream* to bring out the necessity of freedom. Wright intends to portray the growth of Rex Fishbelly from childhood to manhood in psychosexual and social terms. *Black Boy* is young Richard’s triumphant journey as a writer, amidst segregation and cruelty.

Chapter III “Oppressing Social System: Liberation from Fear and Hate through Finding Personal Dignity” presents the stark realities of black life in *Native Son* and
Uncle Tom’s Children and the search towards self realization and personal dignity. Native Son is an affirmation of life which charts Bigger’s growth towards self-awareness. In Uncle Tom’s Children the Negroes who are the central figures prefer to fight against the oppressive social system, either individually or collectively, and to die bravely by choice than to surrender to the white man.

Chapter IV “From Man’s Interminable Isolation to Human Solidarity- A Metaphysical Quest” deals with Wright’s spiritual outlook locating the essential condition of man’s self-estrangement which makes life absurd and meaningless, and finally achieving meaning and purpose to human existence by re-establishing the last connection with other men. Cross Damon in The Outsider suffers from alienation and he discovers in his quest, the painful truth that man cannot live alone. In Eight Men Wright’s protagonists are oppressed and suffer an existential anguish status. These characters have in common a desperate qualified heroism that puts an end to their isolation.
Chapter II

Exclusion of the Blacks in a White World: A Journey towards Manhood and Freedom

*Black Boy* “A record of childhood and Youth” and *The Long Dream* propose to examine the quest for freedom and manhood. In many ways these two accounts of mainly Southern childhoods are strikingly similar, though set in varied circumstances. *Black Boy* and *The Long Dream*, both narratives cover a period in Wright’s and Fishbelly’s lives from their earliest childhood memories to late adolescence.

The struggle of the individual for self possession, which leads to manhood is a struggle to be fully human and free, are of the strongest unifying elements in Wright’s work. By the time Wright published *Black Boy*, he had shifted his focus in achieving internal psychological freedom, especially for people who are oppressed. This form of struggle that most often takes place in Wright’s work, is a struggle to achieve adulthood since all of Wright’s protagonists are male and there are both personal and historical reasons for this. Keneth Kinnamon points out “four basic facts of Wright’s youth- his racial status, his poverty, the disruption of his family, and his faulty education,” all of which he claims “left ineradicable scars [on Wright’s] psyche and deeply influenced his thought” as well as providing “much of the subject matter of his early writings”(4). In *Black Boy* Wright sees his family members and relatives literally and metaphorically, trying to beat and train him out of their own experiences in the white dominated society.

*The Long Dream* recapitulates *Black Boy* and his carefully documented personal experiences. Wright’s fifth work of fiction *The Long Dream* since he became a writer to be reckoned with the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Children* twenty years ago, puts the nightmarish experience of a middle class Negro undertaker, Tyree Tucker and his son,