CHAPTER – 2
AFRO-AMERICAN AND DALIT LITERATURES:
A BACKGROUND STUDY

Introduction: -

Every person has a past. Every nation has a history. Literature is born of socio-historical-political-cultural changes of every nation. History of any literature may evolve independently in its own nationalistic culture or at times be a part of still larger history. Every literary history carries within it challenges, crisis, upheavals and certain stigma that its nation has come across. Literature grows out of such swings and establishes itself as a branch of mainstream literary culture. All this is true in case of the histories of Afro-American and Dalit literatures in America and India respectively. Where African-American history is a part of large American history, history of Dalits is an offspring of socio-political tide in India.

Socio-Political Context of African-Americans: -

African-American history particularly discusses the African-Americans or Black American ethnic groups in the United States. The very term African-American suggests that they are the citizens or residents of the United States whose ancestral roots are traced in the Black racial groups of Africa. It includes those individuals who were forcibly brought from Africa to America and kept there as slaves from 1555 to 1865. Blacks from the Caribbean whose ancestors immigrated to the United States are also considered African-Americans as they share a common history of predominantly West African or Central African roots, the Middle Passage and slavery. The term carries political overtones. With their every phase of struggle for equality, they were given new names such as ‘negro’, ‘black’, ‘colored’, etc. to identify themselves. The nomenclature given to them referred more to their skin colour than to their ancestry. The skin colour also determined their status in society. Thus, persons with dark skin were considered inferior in rank. Encyclopedia Britannica records:

The slaveholder labels of black and negro… were offensive, so they chose the euphemism coloured when they were freed. Capitalized,
Negro became acceptable during the migration to the North for factory jobs. Afro-American was adopted by civil rights activists to underline pride in their ancestral homeland, but black—the symbol of power and revolution—proved more popular... To reestablish “cultural integrity” in the late 1980s, Jesse Jackson proposed African American, which—unlike some “baseless” colour label—proclaims kinship with a historical land base. In the 21st century the terms black and African American both were widely used.

In this regard Vincent Carretta observes in his article “Back to the Future: Eighteenth-Century Transatlantic Black Authors” that the people forcibly brought from Africa were made to accept and gradually appropriate the trans- and supra-national social and political identity of “African”. This identity was imposed upon them by the supremacists who tried to deracinate them. He asserts:

The indigenous people of Africa did not identify themselves as “African”: they saw themselves as Ashanti, Fante, Yoruba, or any one of a number of other ethnic groups with differing cultures, languages, religions, and political systems... The transatlantic slave trade during the eighteenth century in effect created an African identity in the Americas for the millions of enslaved people who suffered the social death of the various ethnic identities they had while living in Africa.

(Carretta: 12)

Majority of African-Americans were directly brought from African villages. They were captured in African wars and transported to America via the Atlantic Slave Trade which took place across the Atlantic Ocean from the 15th through the 19th centuries. Uprooted from their tribal origin, a new history and culture was forced upon them. The vast majority of the enslaved who were taken to the New World were the West Africans from the Central and Western parts of the continent who had been sold by other western Africans to western European slave traders. Only a small minority was captured directly by the slave traders and brought to America. Thus, the natives as well as the foreign hegemony worked as an agency to capture the Africans as slaves.

Olaudah Equiano, a prominent African in London and a freed slave who supported the British movement to end the slave trade, describes in his narratives the
process of slaves being transported to the colonies. He gives an account of horrifying experience of the slaves on ships. Before boarding the ships, the slaves were separated from their families, divided by gender. Under the deck the captives were cramped as there was a limited space to move freely. Male slaves were generally kept in the ship’s hold where innumerable slaves were tied together to avoid rebellion or prevent them from jumping into the sea. They were also deprived of food and water. They encountered diseases and death due to lack of basic hygiene, malnourishment and dehydration. The condition of female slaves was even more pathetic. They were often raped by the crewmen. Women and children were kept in rooms set apart from the main hold where they were tortured to death by the crew-members. The trade system regarded females as perks as the traders could exploit them in more than one ways. While they were already paid less for their labour, the traders could also force them to bear child for free. *Encyclopedia Britannica* records the plight of the slaves as observed by W. Manchester:

> We were not slaves; our status was much lower. True, we were deprived of freedom and became a piece of property which our masters put to work… we were a completely expendable piece of property… The equipment in the shop was well maintained. It was operated with care, oiled, greased and allowed to rest; its longevity was protected. We, on the other hand, were like a piece of sandpaper which, rubbed once or twice, becomes useless and is thrown away to be burned with the waste. (Vol. XVI: 522)

Thus, women were treated no more than a commodity. 20th c. African-American writer Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* records this painful saga of slaves on ship.

In the midst of such terrible condition where they were even not allowed to communicate with each other, the African slaves plotted a mutiny. Women instigated an insurrection aboard by stealing weapons and passing them to the men as well as engaging in physical combat with the ship’s crew. Male slaves also indulged into mutiny but they were mostly unsuccessful. In order to keep the slaves under control and avoid future rebellions, the number of crew-members was twice larger than the number of slaves. They instilled fear into the slaves through brutality and harsh punishment. The entire voyage from being captured in Africa to the arrival to the
plantations of the European masters took approx six months. These six months were like trial in hell.

The first African-American slaves were brought to the United States in 1619. The English settlers treated those captives as indentured servants where the captives paid for their passage to the New World by working for an employer for a fixed term of years. They were released as the tenure ended. Releasing the servants required their replacement. The practice was gradually replaced by the system of race-based slavery. Hence the Blacks were relegated into slavery. Massachusetts was the first colony to legalise slavery in 1641. It then became a hereditary act where children of the slaves were also compelled to be slaves. Being born as slaves, they could be sold or freed. A few also ran away using Underground Railroad – a network of secret routes used by the enslaved Africans in the United States to get freedom. In the eyes of the slave owners, they were no more than livestock. With reference to this, Philip Gould quotes Daniel Coker, “Africans were unjustly converted from men into property by human laws that violated the law of humanity, common sense, reason, and conscience.” (Gould: 93) As White settlers began to claim more land for large-scale farming and plantation, the number of slaves imported directly from Africa increased rapidly in the 1700s. Also, a relaxation on colonial tax laws and the removal of royal monopolies by the British Crown by the end of the 17th c. made the direct slave trade with Africa much easier. As a result, young, fresh and healthy Africans were imported at cheap price. From about 1700 to 1859, the slaves were imported in large number directly from Africa to fulfil the demand for much-needed labour of working in plantations in the Southern colonies particularly Virginia, South Carolina and French or Spanish Louisiana. The work in the plantations was marked by endless labour, back-breaking toil and impoverished conditions of a labour regime under a barbaric supervision of a cruel master. Moreover, labour done by the slaves went uncompensated, unrewarded, unappreciated. Unlike the South, the Northern colonies developed into much more urbanized and industrialized societies. As they relied less on agriculture as main source of economy, they did not import many African slaves. However it should be noted that though the black population remained fairly low for a very long time in Northern America, a few cities like New York, Philadelphia and Boston, had relatively large black populations (slave or free) for most of the colonial period and thereafter.
From the 1750s, the slaves of the African descent born in America began to outnumber the slaves born in Africa. Most of the Northern states had abolished and banned slavery by the time of the American Revolution (1775-1783). In Southern America while some states like Virginia had produced slave populations by natural increase and stopped the direct import from Africa, some other states like Georgia and South Carolina still relied on fresh supplies of the African slaves up to 1808 to work in plantations. Though direct importation of slaves from Africa had been legally stopped by 1808 when the newly formed United States banned its citizens from participating in the international slave trade, small to moderate cargoes were occasionally being illegally shipped from Africa till 1859. The slaves in both the parts of America lived in great differences dividing entire American nation into two opposing forces. While the slaves in the Northern cities and towns had more privileges, large number of slaves depended on southern tobacco or rice plantations. Wealthy plantation owners became self-reliant and freed their lower class. Slowly a free black population emerged, concentrated in port cities along the Atlantic coast.

To quote Vincent Carretta:

Prior to 1800, slavery was usually accepted as a long-familiar part of the social and economic hierarchy. All recorded history, including the Bible, recognized the existence of slavery. Although some people called for the amelioration of the conditions of the enslaved, very few people imagined that slavery could, or perhaps even should, be eradicated. (Carretta: 13-4)

In this manner slavery was an unjust and illegitimate market that had to be eradicated if Africa was to be transformed. While rational thinkers began to criticise it for its violation of the rights of man, evangelical or religious groups condemned it for its unchristian qualities. The Quakers in 1671 were the first opponents of slavery. However, the strongest slave rebellion was the Stono Uprising – the largest slave uprising in the British mainland colonies that began on 9 September 1739 in South Carolina. The uprising was led by native Africans from the Central Africa. Slaves rose up seizing arms and ammunitions. They murdered twenty whites and headed for Spanish Florida. Here it should be noted that in 1693 the Spanish Crown officially proclaimed freedom to runaways in Florida with a condition to converting to Catholicism and for men a four years’ term of military service to the Crown. Spain
had two motives for such a maroon settlement: one, to defend the English attackers from the North; and two, to destabilise the plantation economy of the British colonies by creating a free black community seeking escape and refuge from the slavery. But unfortunately interception of the local militia killed most of them.

The later half of the 18th c. is marked by political upheaval in the United States. In the midst of cries for relief from the British rule, hypocrisy of slave holders demanding freedom is also heard. The Declaration of Independence, a manifesto for human rights and personal freedom, was written by Thomas Jefferson who himself owned over 200 slaves besides other slaveholders in Southern states. The Second Continental Congress – a convention of delegates from the Thirteen Colonies on the east coast of North America – did consider freeing slaves to disrupt British commerce. A number of free blacks, most notably Prince Hall, a noted abolitionist, the founder of Prince Hall Freemasonry and an activist in Back-to-Africa movement, submitted petitions for the end of slavery. These petitions were largely ignored. But it did not dissuade Blacks, free and slave, from participating in the Revolution. Approximately five thousand African-American men helped the American colonists in their struggle for freedom. They had their personal interest in joining the fight for freedom. They fought in order to improve their White master’s views of them and for their freedom. But when George Washington took charge in 1775 he barred any further recruitment of Blacks.

Right from the 1750s, there was widespread sentiment during the American Revolution that slavery was a social evil and it should be abolished. Pennsylvania was the first to pass an act for abolition in 1780. All other Northern states also passed emancipation acts between 1780 and 1804 that tried to give a special status to freed men. The Constitutional Convention of 1787 sought to lay down the foundation for the government of the newly formed United States of America. Though the constitution set forth the ideals of freedom and equality barring slavery from the Northwest Territory, it allowed the continuation of the institution of slavery through the fugitive slave clause and the three-fifths compromise (a compromise between the delegates from the southern and the northern states on counting the slaves while determining a state’s total population and taxing purposes). Moreover, the rights of the free blacks were restricted in many places.
The invention of the cotton gin in the 1790s required the cultivation of cotton which could be grown in much of the Deep South. The industrial revolution in Europe and New England generated a heavy demand for cotton for cheap clothing. It largely demanded slave labour to develop cotton plantations. It is noted earlier that while the Northern states focused on manufacturing and commerce, the South was still largely dependent on agriculture. Southern political economists did not find anything contradictory about owning slaves saying that a future of slavery existed even if the South were to industrialize. Thus, racial, economic, and political turmoil reached its climax till the events of the Civil War.

In 1807, President Thomas Jefferson urged the Congress to abolish the international slave trade. The American Blacks celebrated this as a victory in their fight against slavery, not knowing that it was short-lived. The ban increased the demand for slaves in Deep South. They were sold to traders for the developing Deep South. In addition, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 claimed any Black person as a runaway unless a White person testified on their behalf. The South asked Northerners to return slaves who had escaped to the North to their owners. Thus, a number of free Blacks were again sold into slavery with hardly any hope of rescue. Between 1840 and 1860 number of Abolitionists spoke before the National Negro Conventions protesting slavery on moral, economic and political grounds. Their abolitionist campaign proved them as pride of the black community.

During the early period of Antebellum free black communities began to expand the future of the African-Americans. In order to gain freedom they either sued for it or purchased it. They tried to establish homes and find jobs in cities. Black men worked as dockers in the ports, as construction workers and diggers of cellar, well and graves. Black women worked as domestic servants for White families or they were cooks, seamstresses, basket-makers, midwives, teachers and nurses. Leaving the thought of slavery behind, the African-Americans made a priority to reunite with their family and friends. While the majority of free blacks lived in poverty, some were able to establish successful businesses that catered to the Black community.

Racial discrimination often meant that the Blacks will be restricted to any White business or other establishments. To alter this, Blacks developed their own communities with Black-owned businesses, Black doctors, lawyers and artisans as
the foundation of the Black middle class. They joined hands to strengthen the Black community and fight against slavery. One of these organizations was the American Society of Free Persons of Colour, founded in 1830. This organization helped the poor blacks socially and organized responses to political issues. Further the Black Church, perhaps the first community institution supporting the growth of the Black Community was established. The Black church was an expression of unity in the community, unique African-American spirituality and above all, a reaction to discrimination. It served as a center where free black people could without any intrusion celebrate their African heritage and also as the center of education for freed as well as enslaved Blacks. Warren J. Carson states in the *Cambridge History of African American Literature*:

Culturally and socially, many African Americans experienced their independence through formation of churches, civic clubs and organizations, fraternal and uplift societies, and accepted conventional middle-class ideals. In part this was tied to the belief in the need to prove themselves worthy of white acceptance... In the meantime majority of the African Americans who remained in the South continued to live in substandard conditions, finding no real way to sustain or support their daily lives. (Carson: 155)

The Black community also established schools for Black children, since they were often denied entering public schools. Black Americans believed that they could attain economic independence, moral enrichment and personal happiness through education. However, only the children of the black middle class had an excess to education. Some Whites did question a new project of establishing school as it would lead a Negro to enlightenment, a Negro who would live by his wits. Milton Stern and Seymour Gross assert in *American Literature Survey – Nation and Region (1860-1900)*, “Some had the feeling that in proportion as the Negro received education, in the same proportion would his value decrease as an economic factor in the state. These people feared the result of education would be that the Negroes would leave the farms, and that it would be difficult to serve them for domestic service.” (Stern & Gross: 613)

Gradually as the Blacks started demanding freedom, the court in March 1857 gave a decision that shocked and stirred the black community. The court did not
approve American citizenship to the Blacks denouncing slaves as personal properties of their owners. It also prohibited them from suing in court.

**American Civil War and Emancipation Proclamation:**

However, fight for the right cause ultimately had to bring fair result. The Emancipation Proclamation, an executive order, issued by President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863 changed the legal status of three million slaves from “slave” to “free”. It said that as soon as a slave escaped the control of the Confederate government, by running away or through advances of federal troops, the slave became legally and actually free without compensating the owners. The Civil Rights Act of 1866 announced equal rights for African-Americans in election and voting. Finally, the constitution granted full U.S. citizenship to African-Americans in 1868 and in 1870 extended the right to vote to black males.

The post-Civil War era is marked by accelerating the process of a national African-American identity formation. Although freed, they were still deprived of living with the same standard as white citizens. Therefore, many Black northerners, leaving their homes and careers, moved to the South and founded schools, printing newspapers and businesses. The migrants came as teachers, businessmen, missionaries and mainly as soldiers.

However by 1910 keeping to the mounting violence and threats to the blacks as well as to the whites sympathetic to them, one-party white rule was firmly established across the South by the U. S. government. Blacks were again thrown back to their subordinate status. The new laws created by the White supremacists restricted black access to transportation, schools, other public facilities and government offices. The racial segregation deprived them of social, economic and educational advantages considering them incompetent. Although slavery had been abolished, most Southern blacks for decades continued to struggle in grinding poverty as labourers. The era witnessed the cruelest wave of racial suppression that America had ever experienced. Between 1890 and 1940, millions of African-Americans were butchered in many ways. Absolutely unable to protect themselves and their families, the Blacks lived constantly in a state of anxiety and fear.

In response to these setbacks, in 1905, W. E. B. Du Bois and other prominent African-American activists met secretly at Niagara Falls, Ontario. There, they
produced a manifesto calling for an end to racial discrimination, full civil liberties to African-Americans and recognition of human brotherhood. The organization they established was called the Niagara Movement. Later on, some Whites also joined the Niagara Movement and formed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. Under the leadership of Du Bois, the NAACP legally challenged segregation on behalf of African-Americans. At the local level also African-Americans adopted a self-help strategy. They created independent community and institutional lives for themselves. Schools, churches and businesses were already established in past. They then headed to found social welfare organisations, banks, and African-American newspapers to cater to the needs of their communities. The key figure of these organizations was Alabama educator Booker T. Washington.

**The Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance: -**

The first half of the 20th century saw the largest internal population shift in the history of United States. Starting about 1910, over five million African-Americans moved from the South to Northern cities, the West and Midwest with a hope to escape from discrimination and hatred. They shifted to find better jobs, education for their children and in search of greater equality. This phase is known as Great Migration (1910-1940) in history. In the 1920s, the blacks in New York gave rise to the “first intellectual and artistic movement”, (Harmon & Holman: 248) known as the Harlem Renaissance that influenced the whole nation. The thinkers such as Aime Cesaire and Leopold Sedar who celebrated blackness or negritude influenced Black intellectuals and cultural circles. Arts and letters flourished. Writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen, Claude McKay and Richard Wright; and artists Lois Mailou Jones, William H. Johnson, Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence and Archibald Motley gained prominence.

The South Side of Chicago became the black capital of America, flourishing in businesses, music, arts and foods. Powerful African-American political leaders, organizations, leagues and federations came to the fore supported by the African-Americans. Membership in the NAACP rapidly increased as it strongly resisted continuing Southern white violence against blacks.

The blacks had become quite self-reliant. Women also did not lag behind in becoming self-sufficient. They started their own beauty salons. The beauty standards
for whites and blacks were different. The black community developed its own standards with an emphasis on hair care. They in a way found a space where they could “feel” beautiful.

The years 1933-1938 are known as Great Depression in the US history. It marks the economic downturn of the nation pushing the African-Americans more into the margin. The reformers came up with the New Deal programme to fight against the crisis. It focused on what historians refer to as the “3 Rs” i.e. Relief, Recovery, and Reform: relief for the poor and the unemployed, recovery of the economy by starting jobs and businesses, and reform of the financial system to ease the economic crisis and avoid repeat depression, as noted in www.american-historama.org. Though some signs of positivity were noticed in political scenario, it certainly did not end the history of discrimination. Racial tensions were high in Chicago. Detroit and Harlem also confronted race riots in 1943. At this time political leaders, ministers and also Black newspapers contributed in building black morale and take up radical action for equal opportunities and full citizenship.

The Second Great Migration (1941-1970) was the migration of more than five million African-Americans from the Southern cities to the other three regions of the United States. Since most of these migrants were better educated and skilled, they moved to take jobs in the burgeoning industrial cities and especially in the defense industry during World War II. Thus, by the end of the Second Great Migration, they were an urbanized population.

Civil Rights Movement: -

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, 1954-1968 to be precise, was the movement that encompassed social movements in the United States with an aim to end racial tension against the African-Americans and to secure them with legal recognition and federal protection of the citizenship rights. It gradually dismantled segregation in all public places from schools to restaurants to public restrooms. The Civil Rights Movement was in its peak in the year 1963 which brought the marchers to the ground to speak out for an end to southern racial violence and equality at all places. The “Big Six” of the Civil Rights Movement were Martin Luther King, Jr., James Farmer, John Lewis, A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young.
From the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, the Black Power movement emerged. With an emphasis on the unity among blacks, it aimed at achieving self-determination for people of African descent and the creation of black political and cultural institutions to promote collective interests of the blacks. Ultimately, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned discrimination in public accommodations, employment, and labor unions.

**Post Civil Rights Era of African-American History:**

In the post-Civil Rights era blacks made substantial march politically and economically. A remarkable increase of the blacks in federal offices was noticed during this time. The dramatic political breakthrough came in the 2008 election, with the election of Barack Obama, a Black as the President of the Whites. Despite making way through political strides, their economic progress was slow. The result was New Great Migration in which millions of African-Americans returned to the now desegregated South to pursue increased economic opportunities.

History, so far revolving around political and constitutional spheres, had ignored the social lives of blacks. W. E. B. Du Bois, a black historian and Ulrich B. Phillips, a white historian studied the African-American experiences in depth. Du Bois studies Reconstruction providing a more objective context for its evaluation. He also studies contemporary black life. Phillips sets the guidelines for the analysis of slave economics.

Black history reversed the assumption of ignorance that slaves were passive and could not rebel. The changed purview in the 21st century considers black history as mainstream. Black history is now introduced in public schools indicating their acceptance into the mainstream society/culture. It has led to cultivation of self-respect in the blacks and correction of myths and stereotypes.

**History of Afro-American Literature:**

Given the historical and socio-cultural contexts of African-Americans, following is a study of how the Afro-American literature evolved through the history. African-American literature is a body of literature produced by people of African descent living in America. The genre traces its origin to the works of late 18th c. writers such as Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano, reaching literary tide with slave narratives and flowering of literature during Harlem Renaissance and years
following it with writers like W. E. B. Du Bois, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou among others. Common themes and issues explored in the African-American literature are: role of Afro-Americans in large American society, their culture, trials due to racism and slavery and their struggle for equality. It is also considered a vital branch of African diaspora. African-American writing includes in itself oral forms such as spirituals, sermons, gospel music, blues and rap.

The first writer of note in African-American literary history is Phillis Wheatley (1753–84). Born in Senegal, Africa, Wheatley was captured and sold into slavery at the age of seven. Although she did not speak English initially, by the time she was sixteen she had mastered the language so well that she started writing poetry in English. She published her first book *Poems on Various Subjects* in 1773, three years prior to American independence. Her poetry was much praised by the intellectuals of the American Revolution including George Washington. However, many Whites could not believe that a Black woman could write so intelligent poetry. Wheatley had to defend and justify herself in court. Some critics consider her successful defense as the first recognition of African-American literature. However the first published African-American writer is Jupiter Hammon (1711–1806), a slave until his death who comes up with his poem *An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries* in 1761.

An important subgenre of African-American literature which came into prominence in the mid-19th c. before the American Civil War is slave narrative. The genre unveils the horrors of plantation life with an attempt to distinguish between property and humanity and to reassert individual identity. The fundamental text in the genre of slave narrative is Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, the African. Written by Himself*. He is the first to offer an account of slavery from victim’s point of view. He addresses the issues of abolition of slavery more forthrightly than many of his predecessors and contemporaries. His narrative is regarded as highly influential text for slave narratives. Two best-known slave narratives of the time are Fredrick Douglass’s autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), revised and republished as *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Meanwhile, in 1852 Harriet Beecher Stowe published a novel that changed how the North would view slavery. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* tells the story of the
life of a slave and the brutality faced by slave life. The popularity of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* solidified the North in its opposition to slavery. Later, Lincoln invited Stowe to the White House in honour of the book that changed America. Philip Gould opines, “Antebellum antislavery literature set itself in full force against the brutalities of slave capitalism.” The realization of their degraded position from human beings to chattel slaves provided the foundation of the antislavery position in the slave narratives published in the decades preceding the Civil war. “Antebellum antislavery did not invent this critique – but it did refine and proliferate it.” (Gould: 90) Kimberly Blockett also observes in the *Cambridge History of African American Literature* that African-American literature offers not just an artistic expression but also a painful saga of those who were not considered citizens although they had contributed much. Their writing bears witness to their moral strength and consciousness for independence. Their fight, through pen or power, is an attempt to break the bondage of being slaves. Joycelyn Moody claims:

…all of their texts embraced the fight against slavery as moral duty to other blacks, and many protested vigorously against slavery as the most heinous curtailment of black humanity in a virulent system of legalized impediments to black citizenship and self-determination. (Moody: 135)

In the post-slavery era nonfiction works flooded the African-American literary scene. W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington and a Jamaican writer Marcus Garvey were the leading literary figures of the time. W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), a founder of NAACP, however, is the most significant writer of this period. The works of these writers are marked by revolutionary spirit generating self-awareness and unity among the African-Americans.

The most flowering period of African-American literature is noticed during the Harlem Renaissance from 1920 to 1940. While it widely spread social thought and culture, it also gave rise to numerous Black artists and musicians producing classic work from jazz to theatre. The most popular writer of the Renaissance is the poet Langston Hughes. He gained popularity through his 1922 poetry collection *The Book of American Negro – Poetry*. He is also known for writing short stories, novels, plays, children’s books and translations. Then comes a versatile writer Zora Neale Hurston. But being female and her works not regarded socially and politically
relevant, she was forgotten for decades. Her works were rediscovered in the 1970s in a famous essay by Alice Walker who found in Hurston a role model for all female African-American writers. Other noteworthy writers of the period were Jean Toomer, Dorothy West, Countee Cullen and Frank Marshall Davis among others. All these writers talked about Black life and experiences as well as intra-racial differences between light-skinned and dark-skinned African-Americans. Harlem Renaissance marked a turning point for African-American literature. It brought literature as well as fine art and performance art into the mainstream which was earlier observed by the Blacks only. William Harmon and Hugh Holman rightly call it “The first, self-conscious literary movement of African American writers…” (Harmon & Holman: 248)

The Great Migration which began from World War I and lasted up to World War II empowered the American Civil Rights movement. It had a strong impact on Black writers during 1940s, ’50s and ’60s. As the Black activists had a revolutionary hold on American society, the black authors were also affected by the same radical fervor. One of the first writers influential in the movement was James Baldwin who addressed the issues of racism and sexism in his works. Other writers of merit were Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison who penned their works on the subject-matter of black men’s struggle for acceptance in White America. The Civil rights Movement also saw female Black poets on the literary scene. Women writers were the most active and outspoken, refusing to be silenced. They demanded that their life and career should be taken seriously. Most notable is Gwendolyn Brooks who is the first African-American writer to win the Pulitzer Prize for her collection of poems Annie Allen in 1949. Along with Brooks, Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez also became prominent during the ’50 and ’60s. Keith Byerman and Hanna Wallinger note in the Cambridge History of African American Literature that between the end of the Civil War and early decades of the 20th c. several women writers penned the hardships, injustices and wrongs done to their race and their gender. She writes:

Taken together, they formulate a theory of race literature; they write about slavery, its abolition, and its aftermaths of violence in their contemporary period; they rewrite traditional stereotypical images of manhood and womanhood… Much like other realist writers, African American women insist on their freedom of expression, their right to
depict violence, lynching, and the often cruel legacy of slavery…
(Byerman & Wallinger: 193-94)

Some playwrights also drew attention during this period. The most leading playwright of the time Amiri Baraka wrote controversial off-Broadway plays. Baraka in recent years is also known for his poetry and music criticism. Besides these creative masters, intellectual leaders of the Movement like Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote about human rights. The best example is his “Letter from Birmingham Jail”.

In the 1970s African-American literature receives wide acceptance and acclamations as it attains the best-selling and award-winning status in the mainstream literary culture. The academia also introduced African-American literature as a genre of American literature. As a part of Black Arts Movement which was inspired by the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, African-American literature began to be defined and analysed. To quote James Edward Smethurst:

One of the major legacies of BAM [Black Arts Movement] and the political movement to which it was inextricably bound, Black Power, is that they have deeply inflected how African American literature, art, culture, politics, and identity have been understood, both inside and outside the African American community. (302)

The participants of this movement have concurred that arts and culture are tools in the struggle for liberation of the blacks. Many scholars and writers came in the fore to promote the genre during this time. The chief writers of credit are Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and James Emanuel.

James Emanuel took a major step in defining African-American literature by editing a collection of black writings with Theodor Gross. His introducing the study of African-American poetry at the City College of New York where he was a teacher greatly influenced the genre.

Toni Morrison promoted the Black literature and authors while working at Random House as an editor in the 1960s and ’70s. She herself emerged as a significant African-American writer of the 20th c. with her first novel The Bluest Eye, published in 1970.

Born as Chole Anthony Wofford in February 13, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio, she is the daughter of parents who had to undertake hard toiling to meet both the ends. Her
father was a welder besides doing other petty jobs and her mother was a domestic worker. Her parents moved to Ohio to escape southern racism. She herself says that living in an integrated neighbourhood, she had not realised racism until her teen-age. “When I was in first grade, nobody thought I was inferior. I was the only black in the class and the only child who could read.” (www.biography.com) Her parents instilled in her a sense of heritage through telling traditional African-American folktales. Thus, she cultivated love for reading, music and folklore. Credited with the writing of many novels and non-fictional work, some of her famous novels are Song of Solomon (1977), a tale about materialism and brotherhood; Pulitzer Prize winning Beloved (1987), a story of a slave mother who finds freedom in killing her infant female child; Jazz (1992), story of the search for identity and motherland; Paradise (1997), a story of intra-racial conflicts and violence – the three making a trilogy; and the most recent God Help the Child (2015) focusing on the experiences of young, dark-skinned woman working in cosmetics industry while reckoning with the rejections of her past, among others. She is also known for writing a non-fictional Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1992). Morrison is the first African-American woman writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. This speaks of the worth and recognition of African-American writers/works on world’s literary stage. Yet another fiction writer Alice walker is also the winner of Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for her novel The Color Purple.

African-American poets also gave a remarkable literary output and made sway in the main American literature during this time. Maya Angelou read a poem at Bill Clinton’s inauguration; Rita Dove won a Pulitzer Prize and served as Poet Laureate of the United States from 1993 to 1995 and Cyrus Cassells’s Soul Make a Path through Shouting was nominated for Pulitzer Prize in 1994. She is the recipient of the William Carlos Williams Award. At last, African-American literature has caught the interest of the mass through a talk show of Oprah Winfrey. She earned her fame to promote literature through the medium of her Oprah’s Book Club. Her efforts brought larger audience to African-American writers than otherwise might have received. Emily Bernard rightly says:

Since the inception of African presence in the United States, black people have been engaged in a drama of “re-presentation,” an ongoing, endless struggle to redefine the image of the black in the
white mind. Pictures are paramount, but the battle against stereotypes was being most passionately fought on the landscape of New Negro literature. For black people, the written word has anyways provided both script and setting for racial redefinition and representation. (Bernard: 275)

Du Bois rightly affirms that black writers must present black people in a manner that makes obvious their respectability according to bourgeois norms. Black art must advocate black advancement.

**Socio-Political Context of Dalits:**

An examination of Dalit history in India should in fact begin with the nomenclature. A lot of confusions prevail regarding the term Dalit. Originally a Sanskrit word, *Bhagavadgomandal* gives two different meanings of the word ‘Dalit’: One, as crushed, broken, smashed, fractured, fragmented, destroyed, oppressed, poor or law; two, as developed and blossomed. (4333, V) Relating the etymology to the field of Dalit writing and Dalit consciousness, critics believe that though the past of the Dalits has been tormenting, their future will be bright. Some of these words are frequently in use in Indian languages. But the term ‘Dalit’ has evolved interestingly since the time of the British in India. The Government of India Act, 1935 used the term ‘Depressed Classes’ to mean downtrodden people of India. Gandhi later on gave the word ‘Harijan’ to sympathetically refer to the untouchables or outcastes of the time. Some activists and reformers found the word ‘Harijan’ ambiguous as in the Bhakti period the same word was used for the righteous or virtuous person. Hence Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar gave the word ‘Dalit’ in 1925 to include all those who were the victims of caste and class distinctions. (Patel and Vaghela)

The root of the Dalit Movement or Dalit history lies in the ancient Varna system of India. This Varna system was actually based on one’s skill or division of work. Later on it came to be associated with rigid religious laws which divided the society into high and low classes. A scriptural text *Manusmruti* mentions that Brahmins were born from the heart of the God, *Kshatriyas* were born from the arms, *Vaishyas* from the limbs and *Shudras* were born from the feet of the God. Hence by birth they are of the lowest rank. According to *Manusmruti*, God created the *Shudras* with the feeling of servitude to serve the *Brahman*. [*Brahmajine...kaha hai.]* (Pralaynkar: 67) As it reads:
Ekmev tu shudrasya prabhuhu karma samadishat

Etishamev varnanam shushrushamansuyaya. (I, 91)

Narrow-minded Indian society formed some customs for the Shudras. Reciting hymns from the Vedas in the presence of the Shudras was prohibited. They could not perform or participate in religious ceremonies, they were not allowed to read scripture or receive education. The Brahmins could not accept gifts from them. Even the food they used to eat was the remains of the Brahamans. Kanhaiya Lal Chancharak remarks:

In fact for the Aryans Varna system and accordingly the caste distinction or untouchability was based not just on the division of social class or labour work, but, an instrument to continue the exploitation, oppression [and] servitude. (darasal Aarya jati... ban gai thi] (Chancharak: 11)

Brahmins were considered the torch-bearer or the guide of the society. They used to help society in social, educational and religious causes. Kshatriyas were to shoulder the responsibility of governing the society. They were the protectors of the village. Vaishyas were to look after the trade and farming while Shudras were the architects, labourers and farmers. Initially they were respected in society and considered an inseparable part of the society. Gradually, they became the prey of exploitation and untouchability due to aforesaid rigid societal norms.

As the society came to believe that Shudras were born from the feet of the God, they became more and more the victims of the marginalisation of the upper castes. The task of serving the other three classes was imposed upon them. The high caste used to ask them to clean the dirt of the streets, clean toilets, look after the animals besides other insults and abuses. They were not allowed to enter the mainstream society or culture. Thus, the Čāturvarnyaprathā (four-fold sections of society) which was actually based on the division of work or skill became more rigid as the time passed. The Varna system of the Vedic times further divided the Indian society into various classes and castes.

In Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development Ambedkar says that the Hindu society composed of four different classes “was essentially a class system, in which individuals, when qualified, could change their class, and
therefore classes did not change their personnel.” (Ambedkar: 18) However, at some time in history the priestly class became a caste by itself, in the sense that it became a self-enclosed unit. So was the case with other two classes that formed endogamous units of their own, throwing the Shudras into debris. In the Preface of his book Who Were the Shudras? he claims:

The general proposition that the social organisation of the Indo-Aryans was based on the theory of Chaturvarnya and that Chaturvarnya means division of society into four classes – Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (soldiers), Vaishyas (traders) and Shudras (menials) does not convey any idea of the real nature of the problem of the Shudra nor of its magnitude... Besides dividing society into four orders, the theory goes further and makes the principle of graded inequality. Again the system of graded inequality is not merely notional. It is legal and penal. Under the system of Chaturvarnya, the Shudra is not only placed at the bottom of gradation but he is subjected to innumerable ignominies and disabilities so as to prevent him from rising above the condition fixed for him by law.

(amedkarbooks.com)

Thus, the closed mindset divided the society into watertight compartments.

It is said that every dark cloud has a silver lining. In the beginning of the 19th c. some reformers felt the need of social and religious reformation. Influenced by the western education, culture, industrial revolution and above all, its individual freedom, the youth of India started thinking on redemption from social rigidity, superstitiousness, wrong religious beliefs, narrow-mindedness, untouchability, etc. The social, religious and industrial revolution in Europe and its humanitarian society had a great impact on the Indian minds.

All the social reformers beginning with Raja Rammohun Roy in Bengal to Jyotiba Phule in Bombay Presidency represent two ideologies: one, Raja Rammohun Roy and his successors were more interested in English education, its culture and philosophy. They were associated with the upper class of the society; two, Phule represented untouchables and backwards of the society. Though he received very little education, his work expanded to cover not only the Shudras, the Dalits or the dejected but also poor women, widows, farmers and labourers. Phule became the
Messiah of social revolution. While the upper class social reformers thought first of their fellow-beings, Phule awoke the entire mass that was pushed in darkness. Looking at the Christians condemning the Hinduism and its social tenets, Phule had determined to dedicate his life to social service and social reform. Though he was born in low caste, he had many Brahmins or other upper caste friends to support him in his social and educational tasks. He was the leader of Dalit revolution and social reformation in Maharashtra. “Hence India of Phule’s times is known as cultural era of social and religious reform and educational and cultural renaissance,” as noted by Chancharik. (Chancharik: 30) Raja Rammohun Roy, Keshavchandra Sen, Mahadev Govind Ranade, Dayanand Saraswati and many others tried to uplift the orthodox Indian society in their own way. However, it was Jyotiba Phule who first thought about the labour-class. He stood for the tillers of the soil, stone-breakers and servant-class. Among so many socio-religious organisations of the time, Phule also established Satyashodhak Samaj with the intention of uplifting the Dalits. It was the only organisation founded by a low caste for the uplift of the low caste.

He and his co-workers at Satyashodhak Samaj went against the Brahmins. They stopped calling them for rituals for they never accepted food or water served by the Dalits. However they did not mind accepting money, clothes, ornaments or other articles from them. The Samajists also felt the need of educating Dalit men and women. As a reaction to the revolutionary action of the Samajists, the Brahmin authorities in the offices started harassing them. Tired of their tortures, many low caste workers sought transfer. Others were either removed from their post or had to face obstacles in one way or the other. Jyotiba raised his voice against this torture. He worked for uniting the Dalits. He could convince the government officials and others that instead of verbal sympathy and mere bookish talk on union, there is a need of social and gender equality and social justice. He admitted that to form social, economic and educational rights is the demand of the day. India-based British officers were well aware of complex social system of India. The priests were also aware of religious beliefs, superstitions and rigidity in which the Indian society was living. Knowing all the loopholes of Indian society and culture, they could easily trap the illiterate backward class into their education and religious system. They started converting the Indians in the name of government jobs or other benefits. Jyotiba
wanted to evoke the backward class to their inner self, their strength and their rights. Undoubtedly, Phule wrote the first golden page of Dalit history in modern India. Due to the tireless efforts of Jyotiba Phule, the Dalits started taking interest in education and values of life. They became conscious about communal equality and self-respect. They gathered the courage to fight against exploitation and rejection. The movement initiated by Phule was a remarkable social revolution in itself. In the latter half of the 19th c. he paved a way for the freedom of the Dalits and showed a direction to the Dalit movement in the 20th c. followed by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Babu Jagjivanram, etc.

Among a few social workers who continued the work of the upliftment of the Dalits, Maharaja Sayajirao Gayakwad of Baroda requires a special mention. He opposed caste distinction and worked for the education and employment of the Dalits. However, the fact should not be overlooked that the one who had employed Ambedkar in his government could not continue him on service for long. Maharaja Sayajirao had given a scholarship to Ambedkar to study in America. But when he returned from America, and came to Baroda to resume his service as per the agreement, nobody welcomed him because he was untouchable. He neither got a house to stay nor meal. Even the Class IV workers used to throw his files on the table. He brought this inhuman treatment to the notice of the Maharaja. But nobody paid any attention. The Maharaja who used to deliver roaring speeches on stage for the removal of casteism, in fact, could not protect a high officer in his state from being insulted. Ultimately, Dr. Ambedkar had to leave Baroda. It was during this time only that the seeds of revolution were sown in him. He determined to eradicate untouchability not just on the social front but also from law. He started working for the distribution of power.

During 1909-11 the issue of Dalits and untouchability was discussed at a political level in the journal Indian Review. Many political leaders, social reformers and thinkers like Annie Besant, Lala Lajpatray, Ambikacharan Majumdar, Gopalkrishna Gokhale – to name a few, expressed their views on the subject. However, the second major wave of Dalit movement after Phule comes with Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar.
Ambedkar Movement – Phase I (1916-1926): -

Ambedkar emphasised on political strength for the progress of the nation. In November 1917 two congregations of Dalit community took place in Bombay. In one assembly it was proposed that the government should think for the benefit of the untouchables and they should be given a right to elect their representative in the Parliament as per the percentage of their population. Yet another proposal said the compromise of the Congress League which affirmed the removal of restrictions on Dalits so far as tradition and religion are concerned. For this the leaders felt the need of convincing the upper caste Hindus.

Another Dalit assembly opposed giving the sole power to the upper class Hindus and demanded their right to choose their representative. This was the time when many such congregations used to take place in Maharashtra. But Ambedkar outrightly rejected the unions and assemblies that were not run by the Dalits. He believed that only the Dalits have the right to manage their unions and that only they can think of their betterment. Besides his call to break the rigid societal customs, he also asked for two basic rights that one must have as a citizen of the nation. They were: first, right to represent; second, right to hold the highest seat in the state. He was of the opinion that the right to represent in the parliament should be on the basis of needs and not on the basis of number of people. Thereby, he asked for the equal division of power.

In this turmoil Ambedkar came up with a word for Dalits. He started two fortnightly *Muknayak* and *Bahishkrut Bharat* in the years 1920 and 1927 respectively. Both these magazines proved to be a ray of hope for the Dalits who were living in darkness so far. The initial articles of these magazines addressed the then social, economic and political problems of the dejected mass. When the downtrodden did not have their voice in the nation these two magazines spoke for Dalits. To activate the Dalit movement in 1930 he introduced one more magazine *Janata* which was re-named as *Prabuddha Bharat* in 1956.

In the history of Dalit movement the years 1926-27 are significant epochs as they mark a strong resistance by Dalits. The use of public water facility, public well, government inns, schools, offices and hospitals was demanded in the Bombay Parliamentary Assembly. However as the local authorities and the Municipal Board criticized the rights given to Dalits, in 1926 Mahad Municipal Board allowed the
entry of all castes to use the Mahad lake. In the assembly in 1927 that followed the incident, Ambedkar invoked the Dalits to speak for their basic rights. He said that they can progress only by self-help, self-respect and self-awareness. He told his followers to receive education and get a good job. They should leave hereditary servitude and till the soil and thereby be self-reliant. The storm of open revolt from the upper caste did not stop. Ambedkar, unhesitatingly, resisted. He asked his followers to fetch water from public wells and enter the temples. He considered the Varna system the root cause of all evils and inequality. According to him, equality means to give equal opportunity to all and to transform hidden qualities of a person into power. He believed in strengthening the suppressed. He writes in the Annihilation of Caste with a reply to Mahatma Gandhi:

... Caste system is not merely division of labour. It is also a division of labourers. Civilized society undoubtedly needs division of labour. But in no civilized society is division of labour accompanied by this unnatural division of labourers into watertight compartments... Caste is therefore a harmful institution, in as much as, it involves the subordination of man’s natural powers and inclinations to the exigencies of social rules. (Ambedkar: 47-8)

Therefore, he emphasised that the Hindu society can be united only by approving equality and opposing casteism. In one of the Dalit Satyagrah assembly Ambedkar said that the Manusmruti keeps alive the social, economic, religious and political servitude of the untouchables. Hence the assembly unanimously decided to burn the Manusmruti on December 25, 1927. Burning the scriptural text was symbolic. They in fact suggested burning of inequality and stratification that existed in Indian society. He further says in the Annihilation of Caste:

Caste is no doubt primarily the breath of the Hindus. But the Hindus have fouled the air all over and everybody is infected, Sikh, Muslim and Christian. You, therefore, deserve the support of all those who are suffering from this infection, Sikh, Muslim and Christian. Yours is more difficult than the other national cause, namely Swaraj. In the fight for Swaraj you fight with the whole nation on your side. In this you have to fight against the whole nation and that too, your own. But it is more important than Swaraj. There is no use having Swaraj, if
you cannot defend it. More important than the question of defending Swaraj is the question of defending the Hindus under the Swaraj. In my opinion only when the Hindu society becomes a casteless society that it can hope to have strength enough to defend itself. Without such internal strength, Swaraj for Hindus may turn out to be only a step towards slavery. (Ambedkar: 80)

In short, Ambedkar’s was a revolutionary and visionary voice that shook the masses.

**Ambedkar Movement – Phase II (1927-40):**

The second phase of Ambedkarite Movement (1927-40) is characterised by even stronger fervour to fight collectively for the rights of the Dalits. It begins with the Simon Commission in 1928 which aimed at the governance of British India, education, upliftment of the masses, equality, etc. However, as the Commission did not have any Indian representative, the congress expressed a strong opposition. But Ambedkar saw a ray of hope in it. He felt that they can share their problems with the Commission as their own people were neglecting them. Hence the leaders and social workers of the lower strata of society welcomed them.

In his meeting with Sir John Simon Ambedkar expressed his disappointment with the British government saying that in the British Rule the downtrodden are living under double subjugation. He reported that while the natives treated them in an inhuman way, the British kept mum on their ill treatment. Not only that but they supported the oppressors.

Despite knowing the troubles the Dalits were passing from, the British government did not make any rule or law for the Dalits to avail public facilities. Ambedkar demanded equal opportunities in society, politics, economics and education from the Commission. Ambedkar was against the denial of paramount requirements such as education or means of defense to Dalits for their self-preservation.

As the Indian National Congress was against Simon Commission, under the leadership of Motilal Nehru they formed a committee of All India League. The chief function of the committee was to form the principles and rules for new constitution of India. The committee disappointed the Dalits once again as they did not consider the benefits of Dalits. On the other hand, the backward class in Kerala, Maharashtra
and North India was burning with social and political consciousness. Thus, the Dalit movement had almost covered the entire nation. The Dalits demanded that either the very term ‘Dalit’ should be removed or their socio-economic status should be raised so that they can live in harmony with society. They thought that education and other benefits along with putting an end to some wrong beliefs for them will help them in their progress.

**Round Table Conference:**

In 1930 the British government invited Indian leaders and representatives of various parties to London to discuss forming of Indian constitution. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and Rav Bahadur Shrinivasan were invited to represent the Dalit class. This meeting, the first Round Table Conference, is marked as a significant phase in the Dalit movement as it gave a new direction to the movement.

In the fifth meeting of the first Round Table Conference held on 20th November 1930, Ambedkar presented a real picture of caste-ridden Indian society. Mentioning the blind eye of the British towards their pathetic situation, he asked for a democratic government in India. By democracy he meant not just a form of government but an environment where one lives conjoined and in communication with one another. It should essentially have an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellowmen. He repeatedly emphasised on the political strength of the Dalits. Unless and until they are politically strong – having their voice in political system of the nation, their situation will not change. He added that it is likely that the British will certainly appoint rigid Hindus to govern the nation. Unless they get rid of their rigidity, traditional beliefs and prejudice, a society built on the foundations of justice, equality and modesty will remain a dream only. Hence he wished to have the governance that will protect the masses.

Gandhiji, on other hand, was against special seats for Dalits in the political system. No doubt, he fully supported their rights to vote and was against untouchability. He was of the opinion that the minority committee should remain passive for a time being and the basic principles of the constitution should be decided at the earliest. He also said that the evil of untouchability cannot be removed by Reservation. In the second Round Table Conference representing the Indian National Congress, Gandhi also spoke on the line of Motilal Nehru in 1928. But Ambedkar said firmly that the British government should either involve the minority or solve
the matter in their own way. Thus, the Round Table Conference opened a way for Dalits. Gandhi believed that a special reservation to Dalits will further divide the Hindu society. It should be noted that the demand for special reservation was made only for twenty years. Unfortunately, it continues even today. However, against all odds, the new constitution announced special requisition for Dalits in the Parliament, government jobs etc. It declared their right to elect their own representative.

**Communal Award:**

Meanwhile on 17 August, 1932 British President Ramsay MacDonald granted the Communal Award presenting separate electorate for Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Untouchables. The leaders of the nation felt that it will divide the nation along the lines of religion or caste. In opposition to the Communal Award Gandhi declared fast unto death from 22 September, 1932. To save Gandhiji’s life, the solution was brought out that instead of the Communal Award, some seats will be reserved for the Harijans from which Hindu, Muslim or other minority community of any religion will not fight the election. Gandhi and Ambedkar agreed on this. In the reserved quota the respective voters had to elect a representative from a Scheduled Caste who will work for social reform, removal of untouchability and casteism. Ultimately, Gandhi broke his fast in Yervada jail in Pune.

**History of Dalit Literature:**

This socio-political revolution gave rise to Dalit literature. Before we go into the development of Dalit literature, it is first necessary to delve into the definition and poetics of Dalit literature. Dalit literature is a literature of protest. Narottam Palan says, “The inequality due to machine age kept one class far behind. As a result, the class that remained behind became a victim of many injustices and from that the literature born out of the intention of reform is Dalit literature.” [yantrasanskritithi... dalit sahitya.] (Palan: 71) Thus, Dalit literature is a literature of revolt and reform. Palan further says that Dalit literature talks about injustices done to the Dalits. It is marked with resistance. When resistance itself becomes strength, the literature as a whole becomes a social movement. P. S. Nerurkar in his article “Gujarati Dalit Navalkatha: Kalakiya Abhigam” published in *Hayati* opines, “Dalit literature is created out of blood, tears and sweat [of the sufferers]. It is a committed, spontaneous and resistant voice of the lowest cadre of society who have suffered since ages.” [Dalit sahitya... vani chhe.] (Nerurkar: 192) Nirav Patel in his
Introduction to *An Anthology of Gujarati Dalit Literature* defines Dalit literature as, “The literature that aims at uplifting the dalits by abolishing the caste system, the social system that segregates people into low and high, to the extent that a large section of it is rendered ‘untouchable’ without having many human rights and human dignity.” (Patel: 2) He quotes Pravin Gadhvi who says, “That which artistically expresses the joys and emotions and rights and dignity of the dalits is dalit literature.” (4) Dalit literature is a literature of the common man. It relates to those who are exploited socially, economically, politically and culturally. In this sense Dalit literature becomes the literature of struggle in economic, social and religious spheres and also a means of reformation. Dr. Naresh Ved writes in his article “Dalit Sahitya Vishe”:

A high note presenting problems and confusions born of their hardships, helplessness, ruin and anxiety, a loud note voicing their pain and anguish; a note desiring power, pelf and designation which society has deprived them of though all are human beings. Silently tolerating all these beyond limit since ages, now this class talks about the sorrowful tale of their entire society instead of their personal problems and sorrows….

This literature is committed in this sense. Its commitment is to give voice to the pains of their community, to awaken all and make them behave properly. *[aa vargna... kari rahyu chhe.]* (Ved: 17-19)

Yashwant Vaghela also shares a similar view. In his article “Dalit Sahitya ane Gujarati Dalit Sahitya” in *Parab* he says that Dalit literature for the liberation from Dalit standard of life is actually a movement. A Dalit writer is a torch-bearer of freedom. His aim is to open the doors of knowledge and culture for the socially and economically crushed people and to mould this dominating cultural organisation into a humane form. He calls it a “mass literature” and “Literature of Action” (Vaghela: 46), the action being the acceptance of human value. Nirav Patel cites the definitions of some significant Dalit writers and critics in his Introduction. He refers to Rameschchandra Parmar, the President of Gujarat Dalit Panther and editor of the magazines – *Panther* and *Akrosh*. He defines Dait literature as, “that which provides a platform for the formation of casteless and classless society. It is also necessary that it should also give expression to the exploitation and injustice of the world.”
Thus, Dalit literature is about the hatred for, injustice to and neglect of the downtrodden. But at the same time it is also about awakening human emotions and feelings. In Jaydeep Sarangi’s interview with Sharankumar Limbale, Limbale responds to the question whether Dalit literature is the corpus of pain and suffering and elaborates upon what Dalit literature is:

…We are human being. Our blood and your blood is red. Why you are destroying us?... we are not marginalized or subaltern. We are originals… Dalit literature is a literature of movement. It stands for democracy, equality, fraternity and freedom. Man is holy and more important than heaven, religion and nation. Dalit literature is a literature of emancipation of Dalits. It defends human values. (Sarangi: 45-6)

Harish Mangalam also gives a similar response to the question. He considers it as the corpus of pain and suffering but at the same regards it as literature of humanity, liberty and brotherhood. He thinks that it is fully based on the revolutionary ideology of reformist Ambedkar. (Sarangi: 237) From all the above definitions it can be concluded that Dalit literature attempts to create an ideal society without any differences. It is a call for humanity. Dalit literature thus becomes humanitarian literature. It moves from rebellion to resilience to revolution.

Regarding the aim of the Dalit literature critics believe that Dalit literature cannot be viewed or judged in the same light as literature in its broad term can be viewed. Where other literatures also generate aesthetic experience, Dalit literature primarily aims at realistic experience. While litterateurs emphasise on the story element as well as aesthetic relish in their writings, Dalit writers chiefly focus on the depiction of realism. For them aesthetic experience is secondary. In my interview with Shri Manilal H. Patel, he said, “Dalit literature should be viewed from the sociological yardsticks, from the yardstick of Dalit... It is a realistic literature, not aesthetic. It cannot be seen from perspective of Rasa, Dhwani, etc. Dalit literature is for study. Its form and characteristics are different. It does not strive for providing pleasure as mainstream literature does.” (Annexure II)

The subject-matters of Dalit literature are poverty, servitude, insult, neglect, hatred, exploitation, and inter-class or intra-class problems arising out of these sufferings. It talks about the freedom, security, self-respect and consideration that the
lower strata of society are deprived of. It highlights the degradation of human values because of vanity and prejudice. As a result, it seeks not sympathy but empathy. It does not aim to sympathise with the sufferers but to create equinity and equanimity.

Regarding the emergence of Dalit literature, it is said that the seeds of Dalit writing were sown when Dr. Ambedkar started Muknayak in 1920 and Bahishkrut Bharat in 1927, followed by Samata, Janata and Prabuddha Bharat. The clarion call to rise from the somber state was first heard in these newspapers and pamphlets. H.S. Chandalia Says, “Ambedkar’s seminal work caste in India provided the theoretical foundation to the literary depiction of Dalits.” (19) Thus, prominent Dalit writing projecting the social ills first came in Marathi literature in 1960s. The responsible factors for the rise of Dalit literature in Marathi are: Ambedkar Movement, Dalit Panther and Black literature. Notable Marathi Dalit writers are: Narayan Soorvey, Daya Pawar, Baburav Bagul, Namdev Dhasal, Laxman Gayakwad, Gangadhar Pantavane, Keshav Mishram, Yogiraj Vaghmare, etc. Dalit literature knocks on the doors of Gujarat in 1980s. Prior to that also Dalit writing was in vogue but it was either not termed as ‘Dalit’ or was not as fiery as Dalit literature 1980s onwards. To quote Mohan Parmar in this regard:

Even before Dalit literature appeared during 1975, the problems of exploited class were depicted in literature. But at that time such literature did not have a term ‘Dalit’ as prefix. Hence some Dalit writers do not consider it as ‘Dalit literature’. Some Dalit writers say that though it concerns the exploited and suppressed class but it is not written by Dalit writers so it cannot be called Dalit literature. [1975 ni aaspaas... gani shakay nahi.] (Parmar: 3)

Mohan Parmar opines that literature, written by any writer (Dalit or Non-Dalit), if it addresses the life-issue of Dalits, it should be counted as Dalit literature. According to him, literature written before 1975 subject to the aforesaid problems can be called Dalit literature.

As noted earlier, Marathi Dalit literature influenced Gujarati Dalit literature. While the words and deeds of Phule and Ambedkar inspired Marathi Dalit writers, Gujarati Dalit writers did not have any such reformer to inspire them for writing. As Gandhi’s thoughts were a hurdle to the progress of the Dalits, his ideology did not influence the Dalit writers. “It was after the Anti-Reservation Riots of 1981 that
entire Dalit community joined hands and in their awareness the writers used their intelligence in writing. The awareness entered into literature through society and thus began Gujarati Dalit literature”, notes Bhagirath Brahmabhatt. [Gujarat ma... pagron sharu thaya.] (Bramhabhatt: 36) Dalit writers have different beliefs regarding Dalit literature. Harilal Umarethiya notes in “Visami Sadinu Gujarati Dalit Sahitya”:

1. The first group of Dalit writers is committed to give voice to the basic problems of Dalits. To solve their problems such writers are determined to bring social revolution through their writing. They insist to showcase a realistic picture of injustices, exploitation and pangs of Dalits. They are against the set standards of evaluating literature and form entirely different yardstick for Dalit literature. They are loyal to the society rather than to literature as art. Such a group of writers includes Joseph Macwan, Nirav Patel, Chandu Maheriya, Shankar Panter, Babaldas Chavda, Yashwant Vaghela, Sahil Parmar, Kantilal Makwana, etc.

2. There are also some writers who are committed to Dalit consciousness but also aspire to have aesthetic aspect in their works. They see literature as literature and believe that Dalit literature should not weigh down when examined with the set yardstick. Such writers are: Dalpat Chauhan, Harish Mangalam, Raju Solanki, B. Kesharshivam, Arvind Vegada, B. N. Vankar, etc.

3. A group of writers shape their work from the perspective of aesthetics keeping literature in mind. These writers have affection and concern for the problems of the Dalits as they themselves are born in that society. They draw Dalit characters, setting, dialect, etc. in their works and unknowingly address Dalit issues. But in their attempt to give it an aesthetic touch they sometimes create a Non-Dalit work. Despite of it, significant Dalit literature is received from them. Since they have maintained the relish in Dalit literature, their works stand parallel to mainstream literature. Important writers who belong to this group are: Mangal Rathod, Dan Vaghela, Pathik Parmar, Raman Vaghela, Shyam Sadhu, Madhukant Kalpit, Dasharath Parmar, Mohan Parmar, etc.

4. The fourth group is that of non-Dalit writers. They pen Dalit works moved by the sorrows and struggles of Dalits. Noteworthy writers such as Raghuvir
Chaudhary, Chinu Modi, Jayant Gadit, Pravin Gadhvi, Pinakin Dave, Ramchandra Patel, Rajnikumar Pandya, Keshubhai Desai, Kishorsinh Solanki, Sumant Raval, Nazir Mansuri belong to this group. (Umarethiya: 79-80)

These four groups have created essential Dalit literature from various perspectives. It will not be incongruous to say that if the spirit of Gujarati literature underwent a remarkable change, the credit goes to the contribution of Dalit literature. The poetry written around 1987 was pure Dalit poetry in nature, subject-matter and appeal as compared to those of 1975. Gujarati Dalit poetry was first published in the magazines like *Kalo Suraj, Panther, Aakrosh, Antarnaad, Garud, Tamanna, Deenbandhu*, etc. Some other magazines like *Deesha, Hayati, Dalit Adhikar, Dalit Chetana* also publish Dalit literature. *Dalit Kavita Visfot* and *Asmita* were important initial anthologies of Dalit poetry.

To refer to the writer under study, Joseph Macwan’s appearance on the literary scene in the 1980s is a major breakthrough in Gujarati Dalit fiction; though it is in the decade of 1990s that majority of fictional works appear. Macwan’s *Angaliyat* (1986) widens the horizon for Dalit literature – Dalit consciousness.

Joseph Macwan is not only a writer but also a teacher and a social worker. Since childhood his life was fraught with miseries and troubles. But he has never felt defeated by those adversities. He used to say that sorrow purifies human beings. Thus, he learnt great lessons of life from the toughest times. When something is written from the depth of one’s heart and is a result of the truth experienced it also penetrates deep into the heart of the readers. Such factual literature is received from Macwan. His writings are more life-oriented and realistic. He speaks for the mass in his works and thereby addresses the humanity in general. He becomes the voice of the voiceless. Bhagirath Brahmbhatt rightly calls him ‘the Father of Dalit literature.’ (Brahmabhatt: 377) It is only after Macwan that Gujarati Dalit literature receives a definite direction. Dr. Pradip Pandya in his article “Ek Anokhu Vyaktitva” notes that Joseph Macwan is a Dalit writer. He considers it pride of himself, of Dalit society and literature to be known as a Dalit litterateur. Though his field of writing is narrow, he covers the burning issues of society such as family-life, traditions and customs of society, peculiarities of human nature, human psychology, problems of married life,
generational conflict regarding untouchability, religious discord, education and societal change.


He has been credited with Gujarati Sahitya Akademi Award for Vyathana Vitak in 1985; Sahitya Akademi Award for Angaliyat in 1989; Ambedkar Award by Dalit Sahitya Akademi, Delhi in 1989; Darshak Award for the best creation of literature in 1998 among others.

As an activist he has extended his service for the backward class of the society by actively participating in the organizations like ‘Seva’, ‘Lokayan’, ‘Narsarjan’, ‘Vishwagram’, etc. He has also worked as an elected member of Gujarati Sahitya Parishad, Gujarat Sahitya Akademi, Gujarat State Backward Class Board and as head of Education Board of Anand Municipality. He has also delivered talks on social and national issues in India and abroad.

For my study I have clubbed the Afro-American and Gujarati Dalit literatures together because both the nations/cultures/peoples fall under the category of ‘postcolonial’. Both the societies have confronted displacement and erasure of self-image through inside and/or outside forces of colonialism gaining the status of ‘subaltern’ thereby. Their identities have been crushed; their cultures thwarted. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin rightly remark:

A valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by dislocation, resulting from migration, the experience of enslavement, transportation, or ‘voluntary’ removal for indentured labour. Or it may have been destroyed by cultural denigration, the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model. The dialectic of place and displacement is always a feature of post-colonial societies
whether these have been created by a process of settlement, intervention, or a mixture of the two. (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin: 9)

The chapter serves as an index to the national and literary cultures of both the nations, tracing Toni Morrison and Joseph Macwan. Referring to the historical and political contexts of both the nations/cultures, the following chapters will attempt to study the works of both the writers.
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Moody, Joycelyn. “‘We wish to Plead our own Cause’: independent antebellum African American Literature, 1840-1865 in Cambridge History of African American Literature. Print.


Interview with Manilal Patel (Appendix II)