THE BACKGROUND OF FAULKNER'S FICTION

The material that Faulkner has used to create the world of his fiction comes from the world in which he was born and brought up. It constitutes the backdrop to the drama of universal emotions played out by his characters and grounds them in specific time and space. Faulkner having grown up in the South sought inspiration both from his observation of life as well as from his personal experiences. The vision he thus tries to convey is also the vision of his social environment as he was an integral part of the society which had nurtured him. In his works he has tried to probe deeply into those aspects of life which were presented to him by his heritage and circumstances. His 'South' is a cluster of images, experiences and fantasies inherited from the world of his youth. He is concerned with the culture that emerged with the changing economic, social and intellectual scenario. Thus, the imaginative representation of life in his novel reflects the spirit, fears, hopes and aspirations of the society of Mississippi where he was born and brought up.

Faulkner's South is an imaginative representation of the life of a particular community which despite
diversity in its cultural heritage, faith, traditions, legends and myths lived in the South-West of America during the 19th century. Although it was haunted by inner conflicts, yet it was one community, at least on the surface. It had its own roots and cultural history. Faulkner deals with the historical reality of this community, but his impressions are subjective. They have been generalized to the extent that they can be identified with man in general.

The difference between the attitude of settlers in the North and the settlers in the South went back to the time of early settlements. The white settlers in the South were different from the settlers in the North. The immigrants to the North were those who wanted to escape the tyranny of class and church in Europe. The new world was a havens for the nonconformist protestants seeking refuge from persecution. They were hard working, thrifty and independent. The immigrants to the South were colonizers who were connected with the court. They received large chunks of land as reward after the restoration of monarchy. They were mainly persons from the prosperous classes and a few were cavaliers.
"... Having capital they bought and cultivated large estates, and having power or influence, they were often able to enlarge these estates from royal lands .... After the influx we meet in Virginia history such notable families as the Harrisons, the Carys, the Masons, the Randolphs, and the Byrd ..."  

These families established huge plantations and became practically masters of what they saw, but mentally they tried to retain their British customs and traditions. Being men of position, they had a sense of pride and dignity and idealized the cult of chivalry. English culture remained dominant in their folk ways, language and laws etc., although they tried to modify themselves with the changing environment.

The onflow of immigrants from the European continent to America continued till it was checked. Gradually the intruders created their own pattern of life. By the end of the 18th century there emerged a distinctly American society with its own social, economic and political traits, quite distinct from the European type in the old homeland.

During the first half of the 19th century there was unprecedented growth in the American economy. In the South the society became stratified among the

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aristocratic planters, small planters, farmers and tradesmen, yeomen and poor whites. At the lowest wing were the negro slaves. The slaves produced cotton in the South which was demanded by textile mills in the North. The life of these slaves, who were brought chiefly from the west coast of Africa, was harsh and brutish at the large cotton establishments. The aristocratic planters considered it to be the only feasible method of controlling the great mass of slaves and maintaining their supremacy. The rich planters themselves lived in beautifully designed mansions, furnished with handsome mahogany furniture, heavy silver services with London hallmarks, good family portraits, engravings and considerable libraries. They were passionately interested in parties, balls, card-playing, racing and politics. The small planters, however, were hard-working, intelligent and thrifty men. They were self reliant, independent in temper and determined to maintain their liberties.

The Blacks, who were used as slaves were robbed of all their rights. They were given harsh physical punishment. Black women were used by the white people for their sensual pleasure and were maltreated.
The ante-bellum society of the South took life easy. The southerners had a traditional outlook of life. They clung to old verities. They were convinced of the goodness of their life. Being out of touch with the industrial ethos, their minds had not yet come under the influence of science. They knowingly delayed the growth of cities, libraries and colleges because such a step would have made the slaves conscious of their rights leading to huge losses to the planters. The spirit of nationalism was missing in the South till 1835, though such a spirit could be traced to have existed in the North for long.

"Slavery secession and defeat in the war had made Dixie a place apart. After 1865 the majority of whites in the section were determined to keep it so". 2

The North and the lowland South were very unlike each other in many ways. Though small farm agricultural economy continued in the North, New England and middle states turned increasingly to industry. As towns grew up, factories gained in importance. The main work force consisted of wage earners. Even people having small farms either worked with their own hands or employed

free labour. The Northerners, though fanatical puritans, were a self-disciplined and optimistic lot. They stood for democracy and equality and abhorred slavery.

Plantation economy in the South rested on slave labour and plantation owners considered slavery essential to their existence and economy. Small farmers in the North did not need it and they were opposed to the expansion of slavery and plantations into the free area. The Northerners attacked the evils of slavery whereas the Southerners exaggerated the evils of industrial society. This conflict led to the Civil War.

The Civil War commenced in 1861, when eleven Southern states of America, including Virginia, North and south Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana and Texas, which were economically dependent on slave labour, broke away from the United States to form a new Southern Confederacy. This resulted in a conflict between the New Englanders of the North and the planters of the South. It continued for four years and finally came to an end with the defeat of the South.

The Civil War solved two questions which had led
to the division of the nation. It ended slavery and it established the ultimate supremacy of the federal government. The end of slavery brought about the emancipation of the blacks and made it possible to introduce a system of universal education for both the blacks and the whites. Another important effect of the war was that it stimulated the economic life of the North and developed individual and financial capitalism. The industry expanded rapidly leading to improved productivity. It raised the overall standard of living and people became more prosperous.

Inevitably, it led to a kind of hatred between the North and the South. People in the South resented the intrusion and influence of the North. The break down of the old order gave rise to new inequities. A new class, that of the newly rich, came into existence. They lived ostentatiously and flaunted their wealth. But most of the people lamented an idealized past and tried to resist any change.

The opposing section, on the other hand, became a 'solid South', under the democratic banner, raising its grievances for generations and romanticizing its past - slavery, the plantation system and the War.\(^3\)

\(^3\)Allen Nevins and Henry Steele Commager, *A Short History of the United States*, p. 262.
Inspite of the abolition of slavery, the planters continued to suppress the rights of the blacks and exploited them ruthlessly. The Negro became a symbol of threat to their cherished ways of life. He became the target of their rage at their humiliation and defeat in the Civil War. They withdrew into their own shell and invented myths of a glorious past when society was more harmonious, moral and charming. A curious result of this inverted psychology was an idealization of the white woman to extent of divesting her of her sexuality, and conversely, the degradation of the black woman as an object of animal passions. The glorification of the past became a trap that forced each succeeding generation into making an effort to return to it. Those who tried to challenge it were treated as traitors and had to face most often violent hostility. The new rich, inspite of their effort to gain respectability by making a show of their wealth, were treated with contempt. As a result of all this South became a seething pot of social tensions, violent reactions and stagnation.

The 1st World War brought about profound changes in the American outlook. American participation in the 1st World War was not inevitable. Neither American
integrity was threatened nor were America’s political interests at stake; so politically it was unjustifiable for America to take part in the War. But the Americans were beguiled by a romantic idealism and they considered it to be their moral duty to safeguard the land of their fore-fathers, forgetting the fact that their fore-fathers had been persecuted and forced to go into self-exile to save their skins and their religious ideals. However, after the close of the War, they realized the hollowness of their political blunder when they came to know that thousands of lives had been lost on the battlefield and innumerable soldiers returned home either permanently disabled or seriously wounded. Their sufferings, miseries, lamentations and agonies were unbearable and untenable. Above all the job of the rehabiliting of soldiers who had returned from the war was an uphill task, and a great burden on the American exchequer. Moreover, the ex-soldiers found it difficult to adjust themselves in the civilian society. They felt disillusioned, foresaken, lonely, segregated, frustrated and dejected.

At the economic level, the situation was even more grim and serious. It was an age of great depression.
There was no demand for American goods and other commodities in the world market. As the share market lost its creditability, the prices of all commodities fell down considerably. Since there was no demand, there was no production. All the industries were at the brink of ruin, which led to greater unemployment. Because of the enactment of Anti-Slavery Act the agrarian economy of the South had already been badly shattered. Owing to the depression, the planters needed fewer labourers than before, at the same time, as there was tough competition amongst the job seekers, the planters reduced the daily wages. The labourers often got violent, but they were helpless. They had to choose between starvation or reduced wages. The industrialists and planters both were engaged in the exploitation of the poor workers and the farm labourers.

The conflict between the 'haves & have-nots' was deepened and became more violent. It created greater tension, mutual hatred and suspicion. The human relationship was marred. Many people sought solace in the drink and dissipation. Some of the writers tried to depict the sensibility of the Age at the outer level but the maturer writers believed that the American disgust
and disillusionment represented the universal human desire to realize the true self.

The overall picture of America that emerges from the end of Civil War to the beginning of the first World War is that of dynamic economic expansion. The incomes went up, industry developed at a rapid pace and a vast network of railways connected the various parts of the country. By the turn of the century, the individual enterprise gave way to corporate organisation, leading to greater concentration of wealth. The acquisition of wealth produced a new consumer psychology which most often, because of lack of change in moral outlook, gave rise to corruption. The uprooting of village societies and growing urbanization and greater influx of immigrants caused a complete social, cultural upheaval. The economic crash after the 1st World War brought about not only economic but psychological depression also. The younger generation found a new meaning in the moral freedom of the Jazz age and challenged all existing social and ethical norms.

However, the old attitude did not give way immediately and the threat of change created resistance to it, also. In the South, the conflict took the shape
of intensification of segregation, greater persecution of the blacks and insistence upon puritanical morality. The issues of discrimination against negroes, position of women and change in the outlook, therefore, became the main issues regarding change in the South.

The world of Faulkner's novels has been created out of the South. He has created a South of his own in order to present his own understanding of the issues that faced his region. According to him, the name Yoknapatawpha is a "chikasaw Indian word. They were the Indians that we dispossessed in my country. That word means 'water flowing slow through the flat land', which to me was a pleasant image, ...." 4

The image 'water flowing', represents lifeforce. It suggests the idea of continuity with change. Though Faulkner has depicted the life experienced in his South yet he is, in fact, basically concerned with human predicament. To illustrate the central problems of man in general, he needed some material and the most appropriate and reliable material for him, being an artist, was that with which he was fully familiar, so the South is his microcosm. The World that he was trying to capture was the Mississippi where he was born and brought up.

4Robert A. Jellife, ed., Faulkner at Nagano, p. 82.
His concept of change as an aspect of human existence is closely linked with his views about the South. He not only reveals the picture of the South as a dying society, but also hints at the need for change and the kind of change society should undergo. He, no doubt, acknowledges the need for change in society, but in the way he presents his concept of change, he is different from his contemporaries. According to Walter Taylor:

Faulkner's .... each work may be seen as part of a progressive effort to imagine what the "South" might have been or might become, in both its benign and nightmarish aspects - and to imagine a series of protagonists who cope, or fail to cope, with it. 5