

Heritage Cherished and Shattered in Alex Haley's *Roots*

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Alex Haley's *Roots*, claims the fame for the reversal of Blacks' image in the history of America and particularly in literature. The stereotypes portrayed by the pioneers of the African American writers are enhanced partially and shattered on the other side. Haley presents an entirely new perception which reverses the familiar cultural assumptions.

The new perception of a black man's life in the beginning of the novel in the Mandinka village, the root of the hero Kunta Kinte and the after life of Toby in the American soil is a total contrast. Haley endeavours to compare and contrast the life of a black man in his native soil and in the alienated life in the American land.

The book begins with the birth of a male child, the first son who will inherit his father's kingdom. The birth of the child is the most awaited one and is celebrated by everyone in the village. As the child occupies the family hierarchy, he has a carefully chosen name Kunta Kinte which will help him to bring "credit and pride and many children to his family, to his village, to his tribe" (p.3). The child can boast of a distinguished ancestry, as he is the direct descendent of the hero who once saves Juffure from famine.

Thirty seven years later, Kunta Kinte fathers a child, female this time, not born in the native soil but in the slavery plantation. Kunta names her Kizzy and is glad to furnish his own history through his daughter. Her birth is not celebrated and is insignificant. Though the name was chosen by her father she is named as Waller and not a Kinte. The bloodline is not minded as the surviving surname is Waller's. She cannot boast of her descending loud to the other countrymen. But Kizzy's birth is far better than her son George's. Kizzy knows her biological father whereas George is kept ignorant of his father until at one stage Kizzy reveals his father's name in a fit of emotion. George does not seem to be affected as this was the most of the case in the American plantations. He never tries to claim his right from his father till his death.

In the village of Juffure, Kunta is supplied with a singularly fond and nurturing father. Kunta too responds to his father's care by walking early- a sign of his personal strength and a promise

exceptional physical skill in future. He embodies the best characteristics of his tradition, for “the dignity and self-command that his mother had taught him were the proudest traits of the Mandinka tribe” (p.21). That tribe encourages his personal excellence and transmits its folk wisdom through such maxims as “goodness is often repaid with badness” (p.9). To this common sense is added formal education for learning, reading and writing which are considered essential for Mandinka males.

On the contrary, the black children are kept illiterate in America. Though Kizzy is reared in the big house of Waller, she is treated as a special pet and educated beyond her status but secretly. Her education brings a disaster in her life when she forges a pass for her lover. She is thrashed and sold away from her parents. This remains a nightmare in her life and she refuses to teach her son George. But he distinguishes himself in chicken rearing and becomes a great favourite of his master.

Tom, the son of George, the great-grandfather of Haley re-embodies Mandinkan traits. He is a talented blacksmith and his daughter marries Will Palmer, the owner of first black-owned lumber company. The five children of Tom are educated by Sister Carrie White in the church indoor. Tom receives his education in turn from his daughter Elizabeth. The blacks ever since Kunta are educated only after five generations. The sixth generation has a scholar in the family who is the father of Alex Haley.

Roots celebrates the strength of family connections both within and across generation though disturbed for a while. Family in the Mandinkan tribe works together to protect its members. The children were nursed by their mother and caressed very affectionately and with pride. The women were separated from their husband till their children are weaned. They spent their time only in catering to the needs of the children. The grandmother took the duty of teaching the ancestry to the children. Nyo-Boto, the favourite story teller of the Juffure village narrated “that Allah had guided the steps of marabout Kairaba Kunta Kinte into the starving village of Juffure... and saved Juffure” (p.14) from famine. Grandma Yaisa, on her part told Kunta about his “family tradition of holy men that dated back many hundreds of rains into old Mali” (p.18).

Kunta Kinte in the land of white masters narrates to his daughter Kizzy his grandfather’s story and the Mandinka words. Despite Bell’s intervention, he talks about Juffure and Mandinka tribe. Though it is of little effect immediately, Kizzy felt its significance only after her separation from her parents. She instructs her son who in turn passes the story of ancestors. But the pride can be celebrated in the land of slavery and alienation.

Kunta in Juffure is nurtured and nourished in a highly cultural tradition. The naming ceremony of a child went on for seven days with the father seriously engaged in search of an apt name for his child. Thus Kunta's name was carefully chosen by his father Omoro. On the eighth day after the birth of the child, the naming ritual was done with great pride and pleasure among the relatives in the presence of holy men of the village. A traditional prayer is also said for the "strength and the spirit to deserve and to bring honor to the name" (p.3) the child is about to receive.

When the boys were ten years old, they were sent for manhood training for four months as per the tradition of Mandinkans. They were secluded from the whole village and were taught to fight, to defend, to hunt, to gather food from the wild and to bear the pain and hunger at time of starvation. The 'Kintango', as the trainer was called, was very strict and never hesitated to lash the boys at the time of trespassing. Kunta, at the end of the fourth month felt a man physically and spiritually. The parents were proud to receive the trained sons and the 'men turned children' were allotted separate huts by the fathers. The Mandinkan tribe had several rituals for each and every incident in their life.

Kunta, in America is deprived of all these rituals. His wedding with Bell has a strange ritual of jumping over brooms. Though it is completely meaningless and contrary to the practice of his own village Kunta consents to the wish of Bell. There is no naming ceremony for his daughter or for any other children of his family born later. Their birth is not celebrated and their name is selected by the white masters and added the surname of their own with the slave child's Christian name. There is no christening or any other ritual of any sort which means the insignificance of their part in the alien soil.

Mandinkan women have a minor but significant role in the family. Their responsibility is to be an obedient wife, a dutiful mother and a responsible housekeeper. Mandinkan men dissociate themselves from women, especially from their mothers. Thus "no men helped their wives" (p.31), and "a woman was, absolutely never allowed to disrespect a man" (p.62). Kunta himself asserts his manhood by ordering his mother around- a gesture we are told she responds to with amused pleasure.

But the Mandinkan women toiled equal to the men in the field at the time of cultivation and harvest. They preserved the bread earned by the men. They gathered and utilized each single grain from the farm for their family. They spun thread, wove cloth and dyed it with natural dyes extracted from herbs, flowers and fruits. The bright attire of Mandinka proclaims the talent of their women folks. The mothers and the grandmothers were treated with respect and honour. The women though deprived of family status, led a life with dignity in a separate hut taken care by the children. But

women were submissive to men and men were dominant in the society occupying the authoritative place. It is a world which insists of male dignity and power.

In the slave plantation, men cannot boast as the breadwinners of the family as single earning will be a hand to mouth existence. The women as well as the children had to toil hard for sufficient food. Women in the plantation seemed to be more tolerant and smart at times. The white masters though they harassed women sexually, trusted women than men. The household things and the family secrets were entrusted to women slaves.

All the women in Haley's family from Bell to Irene, the grandmother of Haley, were shrewd in managing the family and tackling the masters. The moral values are instilled in the children only by the women in the family. They did not curb their talent of dying clothes, spinning and other handicrafts but utilized to earn the favour of their masters and mistress and at times to provide their family needs. Matilda, George's wife was strong enough to manage her family of eight children in the absence of her husband. The family structure and dignity was upheld and enhanced by the women. Kizzy did not forget to pass the story of her ancestors which she was taught by her father to her son and grand children. Matilda, Irene and other women later passed on to their descendants. It is only through the great-aunts Haley learns his hereditary which instilled in unearthing the pride of his family.

To Kunta Haley attributes, everything American slaves were assumed to lack- a nurturing father, a cultural tradition, a proud family heritage, an honored social rank, a complex idea of social structure, a thorough education and an exceptional personal pride. (Skaggs, 160)

Haley redefines Kinte in order to show that the qualities a slave needed to flourish are in many ways opposite to those needed by a Mandinka warrior. Kunta Kinte in the beginning days of slavery disgusts the social practice in Virginia and it is obvious that Kunta has fallen not only to a deprived caste but also into a degraded culture. In the family history of Kinte, though all the twists and turns as a slave family, each generation of Haley distinguishes itself. Haley in the concluding sentence of the novel says, "this story of our people can help to alleviate the legacies of the fact that preponderantly the histories have been written by the winners" (p. 888) and Haley's family is a strikingly winner's family by cherishing and nourishing the story of their ancestors with the pride of their roots unearthed.

Works Cited

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