

“Racial and Socio-cultural Milieu Presented in Alex Haley’s *Roots*”

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Race and Racialism in *Roots*

Race as a social category did not exist with all its ramifications before colonization. In the early days, European immigrants were not deemed as a separate race. There were differentiations based on religion- Christian and heathen,- material culture -civilized and barbarian- and of course language and nationalities. Colonization enabled labeling of natives as Red Indians and African Americans as Black people and at the other end, it integrated all European settlers as the Whites. Even in the early days, different coloured Asian people, Chinese, Japanese and the Filipinos, remained outside the main spectrum of European settlers. During the conquests, despite witnessing the advanced Aztec culture which had urban culture and a social hierarchy, practice of human sacrifice and unsubstantiated charges cannibalism were used to denigrate the natives. Converting to Christianity was identified as the vehicle to upgrade them to equivalent human beings.

Significantly Kinte remained a Muslim at heart, even as his fellow slaves converted to Christianity. Religion did not provide them any protection from the vicissitudes of slavery. Kinte’s descendants became devout Christians but still it made no difference to their lives. The constitution of Carolina made it abundantly clear. “Every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves, of what opinion or religion soever” (Uzgalis). Tom Lea the master of Chicken George approves his marriage to Matilda because she was a faithful Christian. However, when Chicken George had to leave for England to settle his master’s debt he promptly sold off Matilda and her whole family except aged Kizzie who had lost her sales value. One rationale supplied by Robert Dabney (1820-1898) why the Africans must be enslaved captures the general mindset of the Southern slave owners.

The Africans embracing of Christianity was not entirely voluntary. Slave owners strictly forbade practicing any kind of African rituals. When Kinte was nursed by Bell she gave him a concoction of herbs she prepared without the knowledge of Dr. Williams. Kinte when he wanted to create a fetish to curse his masters clearly recollected the various ingredients but also realized

that without a blessing from a holy man his fetish would not be effective. Yet he prepares one using cock feather and eggshells. Another impediment to preservation of African religious beliefs in their purity was the miscegenation of multiple tribes in the slave community besides the intermixing with European race through the agency of rape. There was also a stiff resistance from the slave holders that conversion to Christianity might endanger the institution of slavery. Judith Weisenfeld in her *Religion in African American History* elaborates the curious notions of White men.

Sean P Harvey observed the codification of White as a unifying category that argued against sexuality of white women on the grounds of preserving racial purity but permitting white males to violate Black bodies.

In the novel the white masters financially deceive slaves in two cases. One is the case of Fiddler swindled out of his savings by William Waller and the other is Chicken George losing all the savings of his family in the cock fight through Tom Lea. George was promised freedom on condition that he leaves for England to settle Lea's betting loss. Lea advanced in age and poor refused to give the freedom paper after the return of George. George, however, steals the papers when Lea was inebriated. In both cases, the affected slaves never even contemplated seeking legal redress. The laws that prevailed then were such that no slave in the novel held any faith in getting justice in a white court. Allen Mendenhall raised serious questions on the role of law and science in reinforcing slave codes and thoroughly explained the rigidity of slavery.

In summary the Blacks meaning the Kinte family did not concern much with two watershed events of American history can be attributed as a reaction to the indecisive ruling class to take the question of slavery by its horns. Bulk of their energy was spent on surviving as a family unit under different masters. The political consciousness of Tom Murray family during Civil War was much superior to Kinte during American Revolution. That was in no way a deficiency on their part but was a direct result of how evasively the question of slavery was addressed by leaders in these two events. If the American Revolution maintained a studied silence over the slave question then Kinte had little or no business to be excited by it, however great be the magnitude of the historical event. The event simply ignored him and his ilk and he reciprocated in the same vein. As far as To Murray and his family were the Civil War remained at best the clash of interests of two white groups and the family wisely stayed at equal distance from both. This can also be argued as the resistance displayed by the slaves in general and the Kinte family in particular. Roots remained faithful to the way the family saw these great events instead of imposing a false historically and politically view point prevalent during Alex Haley's age. The novel's greatness lies therein.

Socio-cultural Milieu in *Roots*

In the novel *Roots* we encounter three social categories, namely, the Black Slave, the White Master, Free White and Black Workers. Of the three we find one free White worker in George Johnson, a Confederate Army deserter towards the very end of the novel. No free Black is given much space. That leaves the Black Slaves and White Masters as the dominant social groups. The cultural markers of these groups are qualitatively different. Sociocultural issues originate when trespasses occur across these markers. Thompson Cuseo provides a set of cultural components leading to differences between groups. Some of the relevant elements in the list could be applied to this study for the sociocultural issues in the novel for both Black and White groups.

According to Kunta, his fellow slaves were fluent in the ‘strange language.’ During his hours with the fiddler, Kunta was indoctrinated about the ways of the White. Haley brilliantly explains through Fiddler, the conditions of slavery, nature of white law, customs of the new land and the inescapability it entailed to Kunta in somewhat polished slave language. Fiddler had the opportunity to mix with the White masters and slaves of their farms during his fiddling excursions. His language was relatively sophisticated but he was precise in explaining the conditions of slave society.

Throughout the novel all black characters speak in the same way and are mostly illiterate. However, Kizzy, daughter of Kunta could read and write by virtue of her association with white Missis Anne. Similarly, Matilda and Irene could read and write. Matilda was given a newspaper once by Master Murray to take it to slave row for reading out news on Civil War and warnings issued against attempts of escape from owners. Years later at Henning, Bertha, daughter of Cynthia, the first of Kunta clan to go to college, attempts to correct her mother and change her language. The incident happens sometime in 1909.

Kunta landed in Annapolis in 1757 and it took about one and a half century (152 years to be precise) for the family to speak the language of their new land without creolization. It was not the difficulty to achieve literacy that created the African American language in the first place. Creolization resulted more by the strictures imposed on the slaves to appropriate their master’s language and forego their African language communication.

Kunta was educated under a Kintango at Juffure in Islamic traditions. His value system was founded upon the ideals he was exposed to. He practiced Islam as much as he could under Wallers. His adaptation to new life as slave and reconciliation with the practices was best reflected in the novel through his observation ‘Perhaps, ‘the ‘Lawd’ was their Allah’. At one point Matilda cites Bible to chicken George.

In the plantations not only the white slaveholding masters but also the white overseers, free but poor, wielded both physical and symbolic power to shape and control slave mind. They

achieved their hegemony over black bodies and minds through a series of strategies. The novel has several instances of such displays of power. The account of fiddler (previously cited) on white law and conditions of slavery is a prime example. When Chicken George attempted to reduce the space between him and the master Lea he was promptly shown his place. Even at his advanced age and in state of alcoholic stupor Lea could not suffer Chicken George raising his voice to him. When Missy Anne reported to doctor Waller about his gourd and practice of adding a pebble every full moon, Waller summoned Bell and demanded an explanation.

In summary, the novel *Roots* continues to be an important social document of slavery. The alleged errors in the novel including Haley's tracing back of his family ancestor from a griot in Gambia can be alternately viewed. The history of slaves as it was recorded in the antebellum period was mostly by white historians. Their version of history was imbued with a conscious or unconscious effort to gloss over many excesses. Eugene Genovese and his paternalism is a modern example of such reconstructions. Haley followed the oral histories of slave descendants which were more likely to be authentic, though saddled with inaccuracies. The court records, newspaper articles, church registers and other traditional archives that usually provide a glimpse into past events were constructed with a view to deny a historical position to slaves. Hence, they are unreliable to research on the sociocultural issues of slavery. Guilt and indifference, arguable but powerful economic logic supporting slavery contaminated white records.

In as much as imagination was used by Haley to fill the gaps, his sources were part of the history he was writing. Hence the socio-cultural issues reflected in his novel have to be taken as more realistic and trustworthy. Kunta and his clan seriously undermine not only some established historical records of whites but also slave records which run contrary to the description of slave life in *Roots*. Nevertheless, their life history is a powerful reminder of injustice meted out to fellow human beings in history and informs the contemporary reader to be wary of repetitions. Slavery may have been abolished in United States but reports of racial discrimination continue to surface. Chattel slavery has also metamorphosed into other kinds of slavery in the modern age. *Roots* serves as a potent reminder to fight against all forms of slavery.

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