

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP AMIDST THE HORRORS OF SLAVERY IN ALEX HALEY'S ROOTS AND TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with a significant part of Afro- American history. Slavery, one of History's greatest crimes, is been analysed through novels of two African American writers Alex Haley and Toni Morrison who felt a need to express the story of their ancestors, Violence and degradation experienced by them, with feelings and thoughts when held in bondage and with their psyche weakened by the institution of slavery. For Two hundred and fifty years slaves were forced to live without any human rights, they worked from dawn to sundown, could not form a proper family or even live a real life. When freed, a lot of them struggled with poverty and racism. Moreover, it took them another hundred years to achieve their civil rights and to be treated as equal people.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, her most famous piece of work and a winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, deals with the legacy of slavery and destruction of identity of former slaves. Alex Haley's *Roots* The saga of American Family is based on a family history of the author himself. It starts with the birth of Kunta Kinte, Haley's ancestor in Africa, who is captured and abducted to America around the age of seventeen. After horrifying sea voyage he is sold at a slave auction. This saga incorporates the violence and degradation experienced by slaves in every part of the story.

Alex Haley, a famous American biographer, scriptwriter and novelist published his most famous and historical novel *Roots* in the year 1976. He did something no black person had been able to do before: he got Americans to view history from a black perspective. The vehicle he used was 'ROOTS: The Saga of an American Family' his 688 page fictional interpretation of the genealogy of his family beginning with a kidnapped African boy brought to the United States as a slave in the mid-1700's. Haley traced in it his ancestry back to Africa and covered seven American generations, starting from his African ancestor, Kunta Kinte. Toni Morrison is regarded as one of the greatest living writers that has brought new life to African-American Literature. She is the first African-American woman to win Nobel Prize for Literature. She has created unforgettable characters and explored the psychological trauma of racism, injustice, oppression and slavery in her novels. Both the novels deal with the horrors of slavery. The slaves amidst slavery weres able to maintain interpersonal relationships among them.

Alex Haley, begins his novel in Africa and ironically it ends there as well, after almost two centuries, where a young Kunta Kinte who is a carefree jaunty boy lives a contented and an untroubled life. But just when everything seemed pleasant, his life takes an unfortunate turn. Caged like an animal and enslaved he is taken away from his, village, his heart and soul. The book then unfolds his never ending misery on the voyage to America when he is held captive, beaten and starved to death under inhuman conditions. In torment and anguish, he is brought to slave market where he is treated and traded even worse than an animal. Completely unaccustomed to this new place, he longs for his home and beseech God for his fate and torturous life. Kunta tries to hold onto his African identity, which has always defined him. Yet, he is forced to accept a new name Toby. His futile attempts to escape from slavery make him lose a part of his foot. After some futile attempts to run from the hell he quietly and painfully accepted the fact that he may never see his family again. But still, he does not let go his roots, his tradition and culture of Africa. Humiliations and realisations never let his morals go down and he decides to make his culture exist in America in spite of all odds. After marriage and fatherhood, he passes the same to his girl child Kizzy. The novel matures with the girl Kizzy evolving as a mother and a grandmother who continues to convey the arts to his son, George and her grand children and the roots existed. *Roots* is a story that illustrates the incompatibility of slavery with basic human dignity.

The inhumane treatment met by the slaves made Sethe take the extreme step of killing the new born in Morrison's *Beloved*. Slaves had to work at plantations eighteen hours a day. These slaves are confronted with many hardships, such as the loss of family members through death, or through the master's decision of selling them. They were allowed to form families but there was no law to protect a slave family against separation. Women were more vulnerable to sexual and physical violence which had psychological sequels. The atrocity committed on pregnant Sethe when two white boys, nephews of schoolteacher, took her milk that belonged to her little girl scared Sethe forever. She says:

I am full God damn it of two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast the other holding me down, their book-reading teacher watching them and writing it up.

I am still full of that, God damn it, I can't go back and add more. (Morrison 70)

According to John Simkin, southern slaveholders did not support any religious beliefs professed by slaves. Africans were not allowed to continue with their rituals related to the faith in Allah and a usage of drum, the main instrument used for transferring information in Africa, was also prohibited (USA History: Slavery in the United States).

The evidence can be found in Haley's novel when one of the blacks named individually slave laws: "Dey's even a law 'gainst niggers beatin' any drums – any dat African stuff" (274). Still and all, it is believed that Africans did not give up their African faith immediately and carried on praying. Christian religion professed by plantation-born slaves was not encouraged either. John Simkin explains that a reason for that was the Bible that declares the equality of all people. Therefore, southern masters tried to prevent slaves from learning to read (USA History: Slavery in the United States). Nevertheless, Haley describes that a lot of slaves professed Christianity and attended also huge gatherings where they prayed and christened children as well as adults (391-97).

Amidst the hardships family relationships played an important role. Sethe's husband Halle, for instance, freed his mother by payment because he wanted her to "sit down for a change" (Morrison 140). Chicken George included all his nine-member family in his thoughts about buying freedom (Haley 571-72).

'Trouble to start wid,' he said, 'jes' can't do nothin' but guess roun' what massa'd ax for us all. Me an' you an' de passel o' young'uns.' (Haley 571)

Slaves always dreamed of getting freedom. Yet after becoming free, many slaves suddenly came to realize that the only job they knew was working in the field. On the other hand, even black women were highly handy in spite of the fact that it did not ensure them freedom. Sethe wanted to have a proper dress for her wedding with Halle and so she sewed it (Morrison 59). Baby Suggs's husband taught her how to make shoes and shoemaking became her livelihood at liberty (Morrison 143-45). When the blacksmith Tom made a hand loom for his wife Irene, she sewed for him a shirt from the cloth that she had made herself. Afterwards she sewed shirts for all her brothers-in-law and dresses for girls. Generally stated, black people certainly had dexterous hands but they were usually not given an opportunity to show it as their owners not only undervalued them but in most cases treated them like dirt.

Mr Garner, as well as Mr Waller, trusted their bond servants as for the field work and thus neither of them needed an overseer. On the other hand, the overseer undertook the submissiveness of slaves and guaranteed the highest possible revenue. The overseer simply meant security. That is way Mr Murray changed his mind in spite of his satisfaction with the work of his blacks. He says: "I've always liked the idea of an overseer, even though my niggers do a good job raising my crops" (Haley 675). Total contrast to Mr Garner was his brother-in-law called schoolteacher who superintended Garner's plantation after his death. (Morrison 220)

A lot of masters supported slave marriages because of several reasons. Firstly, it was assumed that a married man would be temperate and would not attempt to escape. Secondly, a married woman was likely to give birth to a child who became a property of the master according to law then (John Simkin).

Some slave owners also demonstrated their human nature when any of their slaves died. Mr Waller, for instance, accompanied his other slaves to the grave and they buried the dead together (Haley 381-82). Another way of expressing kindness consisted in issuing travelling passes. The travelling pass was issued by a slave owner and given to a slave who was about to travel with the permission of his master. A bondman who had left plantation without a travelling pass laid himself open to the risk that he would be caught by road patrols whose tasks was to catch and punish every black without this pass. Since some slaves were rather skilful and their masters were aware of their values, they sometimes made a responsive step towards such a slave so as not to lose him. When Mr Lea heard that his trainer nigger ran after black girls at nights, he had better wrote him out a travelling pass than risk that his best slave would be caught and beaten to death. He says:

'I don't want that road patrol maybe shooting you like happened to that Mr. Jewett's trainer nigger, so [...] I'm goin' to write you out a travelin' pass [...] Ain't never thought I'd do that for no nigger!' (Haley 530)

Occasionally, slave owners had also feelings for family relationships of slaves. It was a common thing at that time that a black man married a black woman who lived, and after the marriage also stayed, on another plantation. If the black man was in possession of a rich slaveholder, he usually bought the black woman not only for the reason of their marriage but mainly to increase the number of field workers. This was also a case of Mr and Mrs Murray who bought wives of their two slaves, Tom and Virgil (Haley 636). Even Mr Lea, a disreputable slave owner who rarely showed any sympathies to his blacks, sold a slave family together when he went bankrupt.

The slave trader paused for effect. 'But y'all one lucky bunch of niggers! Your misses insists y'all got to be sold together, and your massa's goin' along with that! [...] They could get more to sell y'all apiece, plenty more!' (Haley 615)

Since blacks had nothing in their possession, they expressed their affection by deeds. When Kunta began trying to pair off with Bell, he made a few pieces of utensils for her. Amazed Bell started to cry. "It was the first time in her twenty-two years on Waller plantation that any man had made something for her with his own hands" (Haley 338).

Uncle Pompey astonished Kizzy in the similar way. He made a little shelter on the field for her one-month-year old son when Kizzy had to go back to work. Seeing the shelter, Kizzy's eyes "glistened with tears" (Haley 465). Uncle Pompey was so embarrassed by her thanks that he just "grunted and chopped faster" (Haley 466).

The importance of community is obviously seen in *Beloved*. Sethe who had successfully escaped from slavery with her four children and settled down at her mother-in-law's house in Cincinnati was accepted by local community without any problems. However, when she has killed her daughter to save her from a life of slavery, the community has turned its back on her not understanding her act. Sethe continues to live without any friends or help from her neighbourhood. (Spark Notes). By discovering the world around, Denver also finds her own self and matures in a young intelligent woman who is preparing to go to a college. Yet Sethe whose mind is full of memories and horrors of slavery cannot cope with all things that have happened to her and spends her last days in bed. Baby Suggs's life was as hard as one can imagine. Losing all her children, even the one who has given her freedom, she acquires a daughter and grandchildren when Sethe is back

A strong emotional relationship was developed between Matilda and her mother-in-law Kizzy.

An alliance between a father and a son can be found in Haley's novel, *When Chicken George* persuaded his master of his son's handiness and Tom was sent to training, Chicken George started to ponder how much money they could earn together. (Haley 573). Yet when Matilda's family is sold to other slaveholders, for their master has gone out of business, their fellows remain including grandmother Kizzy. Despite Tom's effort to buy them, they die earlier than Tom manages to save enough money.

Importance of community was always felt as it is associated with solidarity, unity and friendship. The power of the community might not be so huge today but in the time of slavery the alliance of blacks meant hope, hope for better tomorrows. African slaves felt this need as well. When they came to America, they felt isolated, mortified, they had to cope with their feelings on their own; they had to come to terms with their fate. After a while they realized that sociability with other slaves was the only thing that kept them alive. The idea of not seeing their home again was partly made up for friendships and their future families. Thus interpersonal relationship between slaves were very good amidst the horrors of slavery.

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