

## **RACIAL SEGREGATION TRANSCENDS RACIAL IDENTITY AND BLACK LITERATURE IN ALEX HALEY’S NOVELS**

**Priti Banerjee**

Lecturer

Department of Education

Matushri Ahilya Devi Teachers Education Institute

Indore, India

A nation requires a certain political and cultural identity that would ensure and justify the existence of the state. The issue of nation building has preoccupied scholars in a wide range of fields of study, from the social and political sciences to cultural studies and literature. One of the main issues that concerns United States of America is slavery which transforms black literature and black identity. Slavery in America began when the first African slaves were brought to the North American colony of Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619, to aid in the production of such lucrative crops as tobacco. Slavery existed in ancient Greece, Rome or Egypt which outspread enormously in America in 17<sup>th</sup> century. The slaves brought by a Dutchship in 1619 were not slaves in a legal sense. But it was legalized when the plantations in the South enlarged and the slave owners started to recognize that they needed field workers. The slave trade became a lucrative business and Southern colonies revised its laws to establish that blacks could be kept in slavery permanently, generation after generation. The political reformation took place with the black freedom struggle. These political backgrounds helped Alex Haley to give a concrete shape to his ideas through his novels. Slaves were treated as a property, not as human beings. Jindra Ondryášová mentions:

Although the Declaration on Independence, adopted on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, 1776, proclaims that the function of government is to guarantee the unalienable rights with which men are endowed, including ‘Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness’, the Negroes were excluded from these rights. (148)

The oncoming slavery divided America into two parts. The North was mainly industrial, it required more trained and competent workers to labour as shipbuilders, fisherman or craftsman. The South, require plenty of slaves for the vast plantations no matter how skilled and unskilled they are. The slave impact were more in Southern states than in Northern states of America. All the Northern states wiped out slavery around 1780s and Southerners began to fear revolts of the blacks. In 1808 the slave trade was officially eradicated and made many blacks think that slavery would finally come to an end.

The growth in industry increased the demand for the slaves. That was the time when slaves tried to run away from the South and move to Northern states. The secret network cooperation among slaves and also whites who helped blacks in slave escapes was known under a term “Underground Rail Road” was used by John Simkin. Alex Haley’s novella ‘A Different Kind Of Christmas’ is written on “Underground Rail Road.”

The novella is about a Christmas flight to freedom which portrays the awakening of a white Southerner to the evil of slavery. Fletcher Randell, is the son of Southern Senator and wealthy plantation owner. He meets Quaker brothers at Princeton Where he went for this studies.

Fletcher visited their home in Philadelphia where he met a free black man. With them he attended anti-slavery meeting. He was ashamed of this experience and soon came to realize after reading a letter by Fredrick Douglas in which he wrote down his thought , as if it were a poem of sorts: “ When a human being is capable of writing this letter, if that human being is in bondage , in slavery- if that human being is another being’s property- then the bondage , the slavery is wrong.” (Haley, A Different Kind of Christmas 40)

Fletcher was shaken by the lines read by Professor Lincoln after concluding his lecture. It is the instinctive drive in every human beings for positive identities and for freedom within the societies. Professor Lincoln read the letter slowly and distinctly : In a composite Nation like ours, made up of almost every variety of the human family...there should be as before the Law..no rich, no poor, no high, no low.... No black, no white... but one country, one citizenship, equal rights... and a common destiny for all.” (Haley, A Different Kind of Christmas 39)

He asked the gentleman to identify the author after reading it out. He gave some hints that he was a black from Maryland but his master taught him to read and write and then he managed to escape. Dr. Lincoln discloses the name of the author of that letter is Frederick Douglass! Fletcher remembered these lines which later provoked him to become a traitor and helped slaves in mass escape.

Fletcher joins the “Underground Rail Road.” He returns back home and with the help of a slave musician, Harpin John he frees the slaves from his own father’s plantation. Fletcher at this moment becomes a traitor to the background, to his family and helped slaves in mass escape. Harpin John helped Fletcher in his plan. He was a barbecuer, black and played best harmonica in big cotillion parties in big house. He played harmonica so sweetly on the Christmas Eve for the slave escapes. The tune he played was understood by the blacks only which means run away. Harpin John sang, “Steal away...to Jesus... old black folks. Church hymn, for black folks ready to escape, it mean now it’s time to go.” (Haley, A Different Kind of Christmas 10)The novella is as unforgettable inspiration, moral courage and powerful humanness. It is timeless tale of spiritual regeneration.

The purpose of writer differs for which they write. Writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Alex Haley both write for more than mere entertainment. Stowe wrote her Uncle Tom’s Cabin for political purpose and intended to help America realize the inhumanity of slavery. She despised the South for practicing slavery and North as well for their prejudice against blacks.

No society has been able to abolish human sadness, no political system can deliver people from the pain of living, from the fear of death, and thirst for the absolute. It is the human condition that directs the social condition, not vice versa. But now at last historical forces act in the favour of blacks. With the Emancipation of 1863 by Lincoln and end of the Civil War in 1865, the much longed for freedom by the blacks is truly theirs. "A successful struggle for Civil Rights over tuned the entrenched system of Jim Crow and established political equality among citizens. At the same time, the federal government declared a war on poverty, which to some extent was intended to reverse the damage caused by decades of systematic discrimination against Afro- Americans." ( Michael, Thomas 241)

The entrenched system of Jim Crow which began after the Civil War of 1865 and continued till 1965 until blacks finally got freedom. They mandated de jure racial segregation which mainly applied to the Southern United States. Under Jim Crow the African Americans were treated as the second class citizens and many Christian ministers and theologians taught that whites were the chosen people and blacks were cursed to be servants and God supported

racial segregation. Haley's novel has the reflection of such political situation. In his first literary writings, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* he portrays the sense of self worth and identities which is determined by the status hierarchy and even within family. Malcolm first experiences this when he is shown special treatment from his father at a very young age and secondly when Michigan's foster family treats him as special and in seventh grade Malcolm elected class President. All these racial barriers often irritate him. He is annoyed if people call him "coon" or "nigger" on the basketball court. And though he attends the school dances, he does not dance with the white girls: "Even at our school, I could sense it almost as a physical barrier, that despite all the beaming and smiling, the mascot wasn't supposed to dance with any of the white girls." (Bloom 23) He gets a dish washer job and also a job working as a soda fountain clerk in Roxbury. Separatism could well be seen when Malcolm attended a predominately white school in Lansing and excelled- he was a smart, popular student. However, when he told a teacher that he wanted to be a lawyer, he was advised that, because of his race, this was not a realistic goal.

This way Haley provides a more insight to separatism of the black. Desegregation in the latter half of the 20th century let the blacks fight for voting rights and racial integration. Equality among the white and black became the reality of today's world. The Civil Rights Movement was a set of fabulous events in America aimed at Securing greater civil rights and eradicating acts of racial discrimination against African Americans. America preaches integration and practices segregation as said by Malcolm. Thus at last segregation is wiped off which is the most far-reaching development in the history of the Negro since the enslavement of the race.

Furthermore, Anton Pokrivčák comments that "as a 'second-class citizens', (blacks) they faced racial segregation in schools, hospitals and other public facilities." (91) Whites continued to **discriminate against** African Americans. Blacks were not allowed to **attend** the same schools or go to the same churches as whites. **Segregation** meant a complete **separation** of life between the two groups. Blacks were also kept from voting. Alex Haley in his novel *Queen* depicts that even the knowledge of blacks were not allowed to speak in front of whites. George Pritchard was Jass's college mate and Jack who had accompanied Jass to college enjoyed most of the aspects of college like here he was just a slave and the bunkhouse where he slept was uncomfortable ,food was not adequate but the days were magnificent. Since it was believed that none of the slaves could read or write, they were allowed to squat on the floor at the back of the classrooms in case their masters should have any need of them Thus Captain Jack was introduced to worlds he had never known existed. He learnt about Helen of Troy and about Greek heroes. About Charlemagne who conquered Rome. About Columbus and his discovery of the New World- America. He learnt about great philosophers -Socrates, Plato about great artists da Vinci, Michael etc. George Pritchard's family stayed in Delaware and Jass and Jack stayed with George's family. Here Captain Jack was allowed to sleep in the main house.

Journeying back from Delaware, in George's company, Captain Jack allowed a little of his new knowledge to show, by quoting Shakespeare to them. His Master, Jass immediately stopped him to show any kind of knowledge being a black. "Don't ever let anyone know. Forget what you have learned."(Haley, *Queen* 311) Jass demanded. "There are those in Alabama who would lynch him for it."(Haley, *Queen* 311) Jass replied and inwardly cursed Captain Jack for not keeping whatever it was he knew to himself. In another incident in *Queen* shows that the segregation of the blacks were still rampant in the society. It was a wedding party where a black dancing with white was a disgrace. "It will be the wedding of the year. Of the decade!" Mrs. Perkins gushed." And not a nigra to be seen." (Haley, *Queen* 331) It was a disgrace to put blacks in close proximity to white woman," Mrs. Perkins retorted. Why, wasn't it one of your

slaves that gel who danced with a white man?" (Haley, Queen 331) Jindra Ondryášová continues to remark that secret organizations such as "the Ku-Klux- Klan, arose in the South in order to forestall the quality and blacks. Negroes therefore concentrated in places where black communities dwelled and started to found schools, colleges and churches." (148)

Alex Haley's last novel **Mama Flora's Family** also depicts the same segregation which Flora faces in many places of her life. One incident is described here. Mama Flora had gone to the 'Star Cafe' where the blacks were not allowed. A blond waitress approached her table and said, "We don't want no trouble here. No we surely don't, Flora agreed .All I want is a nice hot cup a' coffee, wit' a lil cream an' sugar. We don't serve coloured, the waitress whispered. Oh, I'spect you will, Flora said." (Haley, Mama Flora's Family 371)

The manager came up to her but was not bad at heart. He was afraid what might happen to the old lady if the whites got their hand on her. Flora confronts 'Gavin' whose father had drunk her (Mama Flora as a veteran) milk and she had nursed him. She faces him boldly and dares him to beat her up and prove how strong he was . Then the sheriff walked in. He mentioned the cold weather outside and Mama Flora said now she wanted hot coffee to warm her up. The waitress had no alternative but to serve Mama Flora a cup of coffee. So, it can be said that frustrated from segregation Mama Flora had to take the courage to stand up for her right and had her way.

The "Harlem Renaissance," a movement of the 1920s in which New York artists broke new ground in music, literature, and the visual arts, served to consolidate feelings of community among Africa Americans and helped inspire the more radical political outcry of later decades.( Moss, Wilson 300) The Harlem Renaissance successfully brought the black experience within the corpus of American cultural history which redefined the views of America and the world for the African Americans. The migration of blacks from South to North changed the image of African-Americans from rural, undereducated peasants to one of urban, cosmopolitan sophistication. This new identity led the Africa Americans to become players on world stage, expanding intellectually, socially and internationally. The Harlem Renaissance period of 1920s was a time of flowering of literature and the arts.

The civil rights era of 1960s and 1970s, during which Alex Haley was researching and writing *Roots*, had its beginnings in the massive migration undertaken by hundreds of thousands of Southern blacks to the industrial cities of the North beginning around 1910. Disillusioned with the strict segregation laws in the South and in search of better employment, African Americans moved to and settled their own communities in such cities as Chicago and New York." (Moss, Wilson 300)

Haley states that research for **Roots** which was published in 1976, took him twelve years to search his ancestor Kunta Kinte about whom he heard from his grandparents and cousins. As a narrative, **Roots** is an encyclopedia of open connections. The story's vast catalog of people, places, and incidents is held together by associations that are compelling but imprecisely articulated. As Alex Haley writes, nobody can do for little children what grandparents do. Grandparents sort of sprinkle stardust over the lives of little children. The desire of knowledge, like the thirst for riches, increases ever with the acquisition of it. Alex Haley's desire to know about his ancestor inspired him to carry out research and conduct numerous interviews in order to finish his novel. Very few Black Americans can trace their origins , they are forced to forget their past. Kunta's struggle to retain his African name was vain and the brutal way which forced him to accept his new identity .Freedom may be a very small term for others but for blacks it was the greatest wish in fact the only wish. Unfortunately Kunta's dream of achieving freedom and looking his own family is shattered when he was caught by the slave trackers and one of his leg

was amputated because he wanted to regain his culture, country and African people after escaping from American soil. The ray of hope, which he had so desperately kept alive, dooms to dark as he realizes that he will never again be a free man nor can he think of anymore and had to remain in a place called America.

To bring to a close it can be said that in the United States, “race” for the oppressed has become the identity of survival, victimization and opposition to those racial groups or elites which exercise power and privilege. Here is an awareness of shared experience, suffering and struggles against the barriers of racial division which encouraged African Americans to react favourably toward Black Nationalism. The proceeding into the future will require to bury the racial barriers of the past for good. The Harlem Renaissance writers and artists during and after the World War I primarily seek to integrate with mainstream culture and advance the political goals of the civil rights establishment through literature and art created and inspired by African Americans. The cultural outburst during migration of blacks from Southern blacks into Northern cities brought the debate over racial identity and the future of black American to the forefront of the national consciousness and final victory of the blacks. It is truly expressed by an African-American Muslim minister and human rights activist, Malcolm X; “We need more light about each other. Light creates understanding, understanding creates love, love creates patience, and patience creates unity.”

#### Works Cited:

- Bloom, Harold. *Bloom's Literary Criticism*. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008. Print.
- Haley Alex. *Mama Flora's Family*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1998. Print
- . *Queen, The Story of an American Family*. William Morrow and Company Inc. :New York, 1993. Print
- . *A Different Kind Of Christmas*, New York: Doubleday, 1988. Print.
- Michael Conniff L. & Davis Thomas J. *Africans In The Americas, A History of the Black Diaspora*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994. Print.
- Moss Joyce, Wilson George, *Literature and Its Times*, Vol.5, Detroit: Gale Research, 1997. Print
- Ondryášová, Jindra. *English and American Literature (A Short Survey)*. Praha: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství, 1975. Web. 6 May 2012
- Pokrivčák, Anton. *History of Great Britain and the USA: An Introduction*. Pedagogická fakulta Nitra, 1990. Web. 23 June 2012
- Simkin, John. “USA History: Slavery in the United States.” Spartacus Educational. 17 Feb. 2007 <<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAslavery.htm>>.