

ALEX HALEY’S ROOTS: A TALE OF SEARCH AGAINST UPROOTEDNESS

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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. ‘*ROOTS*’ touches the pulse that how alike we human beings are when we get down to the bottom beneath these man-imposed differences. Thus *ROOTS* is an example of a man’s sudden uprootedness from his motherland, from his culture. The suffering, pain and agony that he goes through and it speaks about the untiring struggle for his existence.

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It was as if the entire country was having an identity crisis and readers of any race could better understand their own lives through the multi-generational saga Haley had written. Haley traced in it his ancestry back to Africa and covered seven American generations, starting from his African ancestor, Kunta Kinte. ‘*ROOTS*’ touches the pulse that how alike we human beings are when we get down to the bottom beneath these man-imposed differences. He emphasized on the point that in every place there lives three group of people; first are those we could see walking around, eating, sleeping and working. Second are the ancestors-

“And the third people – who are they?”asked Kunta. “The third people, “said Omoro, “are those waiting to be born.”

These lines clearly state the triumph of meaninglessness of existence by experiencing Kinte’s recognition in the deep roots and bonds of culture and relationships. As the color of an

apple belongs to the apple itself similarly Kunta Kinte identifies his existence, his true being, even among the third person observations like skin color, class, ethnicity and so on.

ROOTS is all about Alex Haley's struggle in search of his basis. His hunt and burrow through six generations takes him back to Africa which is the place of his origin. Lucid and severely poignant the book has beautifully woven the lives of six generation and their enduring hardship and labor for existence. The book begins 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. After his manhood training the trainer, Kintago said to Kunta-
"When you return home, you will begin to serve Juffure as its eyes and ears."

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. As a slave, his entire social context has been redefined. Kunta cannot fully express himself because he is not free, he has lost his autonomy, his existence. The tortures by the toubobs were so intense that-

"Kunta legs felt separated from the rest of his body as he went lurching....., shakled by their wrists, naked, erusted with filth, begging not to be eaten."

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.

Kunta's is not an emotional or intellectual journey so much as it is a process of learning the steps to adulthood. As a young child, Kunta hear stories that teach him his place in the world. When he is older, he has a job taking care of his father's goats and he attends school. At ten, he embarks on his manhood training, formally becoming an adult in his culture, which means he has his own farm and his own hut. Kunta's continued growth into adulthood is hated by his descent into slavery. He must come to age all over again, learning a new language and a culture. However, Kunta can never fully become an adult in a slave society. Although Kunta behave with an adult sense of responsibility, he is always subject to the humiliating realizations that he is treated as less than a man, human being. But these humiliations and realizations never let his morals go down and he decides to make his culture exist in America inspite of all odds.

Even after holy matrimony 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 crux of incompatibility is the manner in which individual family members are sold without regard for family ties. For instance, Kunta and Bell have their daughter sold away from them, and Kizzy suffers the same fate when Tom Lee sells her daughter- in- law and grand- children from her. It is in these heart rending scenes that the cruelty of treating humans like property is most evident. Slaves who are sold away from their families never see them again, cannot attend a loved ones funeral, hold a grandchild or celebrate a son's marriage.

Master Waller can order Kunta to drive him to see his family whenever he wants but when he sells Kizzy, Kunta knows he will never see her again. Although both Master Waller and Master Murray are portrayed as relatively fair owners, the constant threat of separation shows how inhumane slavery is and how their participation in slavery makes them inhumane. The story then proceeds with the lives of generation over generation till the time of the author's birth. And it is then that Alex Haley takes on to trace his ancestry and decides to write a book on it. Hence, the essence of the book lies not just in the pain and agonizing suffering of human lives but it is with one man, Kunta Kinte, who decided not to lose his identity for the world to know who they were. Haley has stated that the most emotional moment of his life occurred on September 29, 1967, when he stood at the site in Annapolis, Maryland where his ancestor arrived from Africa in chains exactly 200yrs. before. Haley writes:-

“Staring out to seaward across those waters over which my great great great great grand father had been brought, again I found myself weeping .”

Even after 12 years, ROOTS being published, Haley spent years travelling in the hold of a ship to get a feel for how slaves must have felt when they were being transported in chains from Africa to United States.

Thus ROOTS is not only the saga of a single family but also a true tale of existence of a culture from generation to generation against all odds, that is very much evident when the readers are given a detailed description of the young man's, Kunta Kinte's, life, family and tribe. It's no secret that he is captured, shipped to America and sold to a plantation owner but the truth remains that in spite of the harsh treatment, the racial perceptions, politics, he made his roots, his culture exist. He endures a hard life as a slave, marries Bell, a slave cook and has a daughter Kizzy. At 16, Kizzy is sold to another slave owner and the story passes to her. She has a son from her new brutal owner and was named Chicken George. He now takes the responsibility to transfer Kunta's culture to Tom, Cynthia, Bertha until this family history reaches Alex, Alex Haley. And Kunta's culture was nurtured and finally enjoyed the triumph of existence.

After covering seven generations, the story did not stop here. Alex went two centuries back to find the trace of Kuntas' existence and he did claim that his actual ancestor was identified as Kunta Kinte as per the Griot, the storyteller Haley also claimed to have identified the specific slave ship and its specific voyage that transported Kunta Kinte from Africa to North America in 1767 . Thus a search against all sort of uprootedness was finally achieved. This is what the existential philosophers call transcendence.

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