

Victimization of Women in the Select Novels of Alex Haley



A. Rajeswari, S. Ayyappa Raja

Abstract— Alex Haley brings out his issues related to race and gender in his novels. He highlights the suppression of women by men, struggle for equality for women, discrimination taking place in all levels such as physical, mental and economic in his novels. Women have been made as victims at the high-handedness of men. They face physical abuse and mental torture. During the slave trade, men and women had brought from Africa to serve in the fields of America. Alex Haley throws light on the status of Black women in her novels who have been made victims of physical and mental abuse. The main purpose of slave trade is to bring human resource from other countries especially from Africa and sell them in the open markets just as cattle. When the slaves are sold, rich plantation owners buy them and the slaves become their property. If it is a man, he must do all the farm works. In the case of a girl, she will be raised till she attains her puberty and she must do all the household works. It is the duty of the slave girl to take care and raise the owner's children. The slave girl will have to face sexual abuses from their white masters. They get pregnant because of their masters. Sometimes, slave girls will be sold to another White master for money. The Black slave girls undergo cruel treatment from their owners. They have experienced severe sexual harassments because of their gender and race. This paper focuses on how woman becomes a victim of racial violence and sexual harassment during the slavery period in Alex Haley's novels

Roots: The Saga of an American Family and Queen: The Story of an American Family.

Alex Haley is a prominent Black writer. His novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* won Pulitzer Prize. His works include *The Autobiography of Malcom X*, *Mama Flora's Family* and *A Different Kind of Christmas*. He gives an authentic picture of the life of slaves in his novels. His novels also portray the sufferings of Black people and the domination of White people. *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* and *Queen: The Story of an American Family* are sequel novels which present the history of Alex Haley's maternal and paternal families. In these two novels, he has dealt with his ancestors who are slaves. It is a perfect fact-fiction novel and it is a good example for slave narration.

Varieties of themes can be traced out in his novels. Gender and racial issues are predominant ones.

In the first novel, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, Alex Haley clearly depicts the sufferings and the racial and sexual problems faced by the Black slave women. One of the main characters is Kizzy and through her the problems of the slave girls are depicted. Kizzy plays a main role in this novel and she is the daughter of the protagonist Kunta Kinte, who is a slave captured from Africa and spends his slavery life in the White American society. Richard West observes in his article, "*Roots and the Sunday Times*" that "Over the generations, black girls were forced to breed from white masters; families were dispersed, and slaves did not even know their fathers." (19-20) This is the state of affairs of the life of the Black girls. Kizzy is separated from her parents and is sold to a Whiteman named Tom Lea. Her father and mother do not have the power to stop her selling. They plead to their master to show mercy on their daughter but he has not stopped: "'Kizzy! Kizzy chile! Lawd Gwad, don't let 'em sell my Kizzy!'" As she burst out the back door with Kunta behind her, Bell's screams reached away out to where the field hands were, who came racing" (*Roots*, 425). It shows the sad plight of the Black slaves in America.

Kizzy's new master rapes her and gives her sexual tortures. She is treated brutally by her new master. Alex Haley describes the cruel treatment: "When he sprang, seeing Kizzy, she wrenched loose, shrieking, as with an angry curse he brought the whip cracking down across the back of her neck. "I'll take the hide off you!" Lunging like a wild woman, Kizzy clawed at his contorted face, but slowly he forced her roughly to the floor" (*Roots*, 428). Kizzy not only undergoes sexual harassment but also she is beaten hard with whip. Though she has begged him for mercy, he becomes more and more wild. Since he is drunk, he is not conscious and she experiences severe pain both physically and mentally. She screams out of pain and she could not express her agony: "Striking her another numbing blow then came the searing pain as he forced his way into her, and Kizzy's senses seemed to explode. On and on it went, until finally she lost consciousness" (*Roots*, 428). Eventually she gives birth to a boy child who is born with a light coloured skin tone as a mulatto. The condition of Kizzy is the same to the condition of all the slave girls born in Black community. They have faced problems at two levels. They are suppressed on the basis of their race and gender.

In the novel, *Queen: The Story of an American Family*, Alex Haley narrates clearly how Black slave women become victims of racial violence and sexual abuse.

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It is the last novel of Alex Haley and he narrates the paternal family history of him in it. This novel was written in the year 1993. Alex Haley passed away before completing this novel and the latter part of the novel was completed by David Stevens with the help of the notes and hints left by Alex Haley. The novel is knotted around Queen, the protagonist of this novel and Alex Haley's own paternal grandmother. This novel portrays the sufferings

of a young mulatto girl who has faced racial violence and suppression in the male dominant society. In each phase of her life, she undergoes various difficulties. The two vital reasons for her sufferings are: her light coloured skin tone and her position as a slave, born for a rich White Irish plantation owner and a Black slave.

The protagonist of the novel Queen has faced both the sexual assault and racial discrimination. The writer depicts how a woman is suppressed because of her race, colour and gender. Queen is a mulatto, who has light toned skin. Her light coloured skin makes her different from others. Her father Captain James Jackson is otherwise called Jass. He is a rich White plantation heir. He is forced to marry a wealthy White lady named Lizzie and she eventually gives birth to a girl baby for whom Queen becomes a playmate. Lizzie becomes more jealous on Easter, the mother of Queen. The main reason is that she wants to have Jackson's child first. Unfortunately, it does not happen. Hence, she develops hatred towards Queen. It is James Jackson who has named her daughter as Queen. Even though she is born for a slave, he has considered her daughter as a princess and he has left the father's name empty: "Her name was Queen, and she was very proud of it- she thought it made her special – but her gra'pappy always called her princess, which puzzled her" (*Queen*, 340).

Queen always wants to know about her father but her mother does not want to reveal it to her, keeping in her mind that it will be danger for her life and even she may be sent out of the plantation because of it. Queen's father Captain James Jackson desires to reveal it to her and raises her daughter in the big house just like the other White children:

Easter was furious with him. 'You stop that Cap'n Jack, yo' hear?' Why couldn't he understand it would never be, and that Easter didn't want it to be? Queen was hers; she made Easter's world whole and complete. She didn't want to lose her, and didn't want to expose her to the less than tender mercies of Lizzie. 'She a slave chile, and she she allus will be a slave! Jus' like I'll allus be a slave, and yo'll allus be a slave!' (*Queen*, 347)

RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

As she is born to a slave, her father's family members (Whites) reject her and she is also not accepted by her mother's family members (Blacks). She hates the big house where her father's family members live:

She didn't like it when there were other white people staying there – visitors, mammy called them – because then she wasn't allowed to go near the big house, not even if there were little boy and girl visitors. She wasn't allowed to play with them because they were White and she was a nigra, but

she thought she didn't looked like a nigra, she looked just like the White children. (*Queen*, 340)

Without knowing about her ancestral link, Queen faces humiliation in the society especially when she plays with other children. They mock and laugh at her by asking about her father and light toned skin:

"Queen, Queen, say she White, but she nigger like us!"

"Queen was standing in the center of the ring of children, tears in her eyes."

"I am White," she cried. "Look at me!"

"Queen, Queen," they chanted. "Ain't got no pappy, don't know who he is." (*Queen*, 356)

Queen's father James Jackson who encounters this incident, consoles her by telling how he was bullied during his childhood. He says, "Jass remembered his days at school when they used to call him "nigger lover" and beat him up..." "People used to call me names, too when I was little, he told her and drying her eyes with his handkerchief" (*Queen*, 356).

Her father is very cautious about her and he often makes sure that she does not get hurt or gets into trouble because of her skin complexion. Though he loves and showers enormous affection for his child, he cannot show it outwardly because of the only reason that she is born for Black slave. As a child, Queen could not understand about slaves and slavery life: "Mostly, she didn't understand why she was a slave. Mammy told her it was because she was a nigra and all nigras were slaves, but Queen knew she didn't look like a nigra – she was at least as White as Miss Lizzie or Miss Mary – and she didn't like a lot of the nigras very much" (*Queen*, 372). After Easter's death, Queen has no one at the plantation and her father James Jackson is not in a position to help her. Both sides of her family members isolate her from their communities. She is neither accepted by the Black community nor by the White community. Even her White grandmother advises her to move out, which will be good for her life. Lizzie as a representative of White community does not accept Queen and she sends her out of the plantation. Queen plans to travel to South. On the way, she meets Alice, who like Queen is fair skinned lady and tries to escape to South. They take apartment and live together. Soon Queen gets a job in a flower shop and eventually meets a white man named Digby. Digby is a former confederate soldier and he is attracted towards Queen. Digby approaches Queen not knowing about her identity. In spite of Alice's constant advice, Queen accepts his proposal. She hides her real identity and ancestry. Digby often enquires about her family. She hides it from him. Alex Haley has exhibited the racial discrimination faced by the other characters in the novel.

Digby reveals her first rape attempt to Queen. He narrates her how brutally he and his friends have raped a slave girl:

He learned to cultivate that poetic melancholy that so entranced Queen, ingratiated himself with his tutors, and persuaded them that he could not possibly be guilty of the injuries he was sometimes accused of inflicting. He did not lose his virginity at the military academy; he inflicted it, forcefully, on an unwilling slave girl, in the company of two of his friends. When the girl protested,

Digby beat her until she bled, and when it was his turn to have her, the taste of her blood on his lips, the sound of her screams in his ears, were precious to him, and infinitely exciting. (*Queen*, 517)

It shows the atrocities committed against the innocent women by the White men. They have made them victims of physical abuse and mental torture. In order to come out from her loneliness, Queen wants her relationship to continue with Digby. Digby is totally against Blacks and he hates and hurts Blacks especially Black women. He treats the Black women brutally and gives severe sexual tortures to them:

“It is against God’s law to pretend that the blacks are equal to us, he said.”

“Do you hate black people so much?” she whispered, and added an outrageous variant on the truth. “I was always very fond of our nigras.”

“To her surprise, Digby laughed. “I don’t hate them; they simply are not equals,” he said. “But they are not to blame for what happened. The Yankees are to blame. It’s the Yankees I hate.” (*Queen*, 514)

Queen has witnessed Digby’s cruel treatment towards Black people. Soon Digby may guess about Queen’s real identity. He has given fake information about himself, his family and also his lifestyle: “Digby had guessed that Queen had coloured blood almost from the moment he saw her, for he was a consummate liar himself and lived a fantasy existence, of his own fabrication” (*Queen*, 517).

When Queen has visited his apartment, she becomes a victim of severe sexual violence and torture because of her racial identity. Digby has given her a dose of laudanum which makes her lose her consciousness. He pours out the truth about her real identity and sexually tortures her. His hatred for Black people gets revealed: “The fear of his increasingly violence battled with the drug, and she struggled against him, which made him laugh. He pinched her hard, and slapped her rump, and it hurt her. She cried out, and her cries of pain mingled with his cries of lust. He hit her again, and there was nothing playful in it and she saw that same look in his eyes as when he hit the beggar.” (*Queen*, 524) It shows clearly how cruelly the Black women are treated by the White men.

Queen has experienced the extreme sexual tortures from Digby. The pain of both her heart and body is indescribable. The helpless woman faces racial violence because of her light toned skin. She has been made a victim of rape and several tortures. It provides pain and she suffers a lot :

He ripped her petticoat and her knickers and forced himself between her legs, mauling her breasts, slapping her face, biting her shoulders. He wrenched at the buttons on his pants, and pushed her head down to his groin. When she screamed, he hit her again and told her to do it to prove that she loved him. (525)

Queen is unable to tolerate the pain caused during her sexual tortures. She begs to God to save her from the unbearable pain and violence: “Pain was searing through her like lightning. She screamed, and begged God to save her, and eventually God could not bear to see her in so much agony, and delivered a merciful oblivion unto His tormented daughter” (*Queen*, 525). Digby has already found the original identity of Queen. Since he has extreme hatred towards Black people especially towards Negro girls, he gets immense pleasure in torturing them and sees their pain.

While torturing her, he explains her that it’s a game which he was playing in the name of love:

“Now the game’s over and you have lost ,” he said. “So you have to pay.”

She tried to run from the bed, but he caught her, and hit her with all his might. She screamed and fell, blood running from her mouth. He forced himself into her mouth again, thrust himself into her while she gagged and cried. He hit her rump, a dozen times, each time harder than before. When she tried to pull free from him again, he smashed his fist into her face. He tore open her bodice and bit her breasts until he drew blood. (*Queen*, 525)

Digby’s extreme hatredness is revealed by his brutal action. “Even at the pitch of his frenzied desire, a greater passion ruled him, and at the time of his climax, he spilled his seed onto her and not into her, for there were enough nigger bastards in the world already.” (*Queen*, 525) It shows the cruel treatment meted out by the Black girls at the hands of the White men.

If a boy is born as a mulatto, there will be less problem for him to survive in the racially segregated and male dominant society. On the contrary, it is very cruel and dangerous for a woman who has a Black mother and White father. Her ancestry serves as a great problem. She has to face difficulties which include racial discrimination and sexual violence. Gender and racial issues are together portrayed in the novel through the protagonist Queen. Her life has always been a strangled one. From her childhood, she has suffered from racial discrimination.

Queen is isolated because of her light toned skin colour. Since she is born for a Black slave mother and a rich White plantation owner, she has faced problems about her identity. Her quest for her identity continues from her childhood and even though she finds about it, she could not live with that identity. She is dominated and suppressed by both White men and women. When her father marries a rich White lady, her struggle for survival starts. Eventually, she is sent out of the plantation because of a White woman. She is often disturbed by the White women because of her identity as a Black slave with a light coloured skin. When she comes to the real world outside the plantation, she undergoes sexual tortures. It is also because of her race and gender. At last, she is mentally disturbed due to the bitter and brutal experiences she has faced in her life.

The critic Angela Davis argues in her work, *Women, Race and Class*, that rape is “an essential dimension of the social relation between slave master and slave involving routine rapes of Black slave women by their White masters” (175). This argument is vividly seen in Alex Haley’s novels. Both Kizzy and Queen, who belong to Black community are frequently raped and have faced sexual violence in their lives. Alex Haley has narrated in detail how women become victims of sexual violence. In both the novels, the female characters Kizzy and Queen have become victims and undergo severe sexual tortures. Most of the slave girls have undergone the same suppression in their life as that of Kizzy and Queen.

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