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Migration: ADiasporic Phenomenaas Witnessed in Alex Haley’s *Roots*

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Abstract:

It has been roughly estimated that from 1500 to 1860, about 12 million Africans were forcibly transported to America, out of which a staggering 1.5 to 2 million succumbed to death in the course of the gruelling journey ‘the middle passage’. The inhuman conditions of their journey, the further atrocities perpetrated on these ‘slaves’ on arrival in their new homeland, and the denial of all human rights with regard to them, has been effectively captured in a heart rendering saga by the Pulitzer Prize winning African-American author Alex Haley in his diasporic novel *Roots*. The author has traced his family history seven generations back and narrates the story of his forefather, Kunta Kinte, who was one of the victims of this forced migration, and also of his successors, who struggled hard in an attempt to carve a new African-American identity.

Keywords: migration, diasporic literature, rootlessness, quest for identity, African-American context

Migration has been defined as “the movement by the people from one place to another with the intention of settling, permanently in the new location. The movement is often over long distances and from one country to another” (“Migration”). Migration is a common phenomenon since ancient times when people migrated to other areas in search of better living conditions and also, in the recent era it is an emergent trend, especially among the highly qualified younger generation in search of a better life, than the one that can be accorded to by their own homeland, to the more developed world.

How far does migration succeed in fulfilling these existential ambitions is a debatable point. On the surface, it just appears as a movement (or shift) on the physical plane but it has far reaching consequences for the migrants and also for their forthcoming generations. Though clichéd, ‘Grass is always greener on the other side’ proves to be the reality for many of them. Migration involves not only severing one’s roots from one’s culture, traditions, lifestyle, history, geography and way of living but also involves a sense of rootlessness, displacement, isolation and identity crisis while carving an existence of one’s own in the new land.

Literature, being a reflection of life, has tried to explore all the dimensions of the question of migration and has evolved its own branch of study, labelled as 'Diasporic literature'. 'Diaspora' is a term derived from Greek which means 'scattering'. It refers "to the dispersion of a people from their homeland" (Taylor).

Historically, 'Diaspora' can be identified with the "expulsion of Jews from Judea, the fleeing of Greeks after the fall of Constantinople, the African Trans-Atlantic slave trade" ("Migration") to name a few migrational movements. Robin Cohen catalogues Diaspora as: "Victim Diasporas, Labour Diasporas, Imperial Diasporas, Trade Diasporas, Homeland Diasporas, Cultural Diasporas" (Singh). Taking a broader view, Diaspora can be classified as – Forced or Voluntary.

Falling in the first category, African migrants are regarded as "victims of extremely aggressive transmigrational policies" (Singh). It has been roughly estimated that from 1500 to 1860, about 12 million Africans were forcibly transported to America, out of which a staggering 1.5 to 2 million succumbed to death in the course of the gruelling journey 'the middle passage'. The burgeoning American economy was fulfilling two thirds of the world's demand of cotton by the mid-19th century due to expansion of agricultural land and new technological innovations. However, diseases like smallpox, yellow fever and malaria, had taken a very heavy toll of human lives and substantially dwindled the American population. The increasing shortage of labour was compensated by capturing or trading the Africans and then coercing them to go to America.

The inhuman conditions of their journey, the further atrocities committed on these 'slaves' on arrival in their new homeland, and the denial of all human rights with regard to them, has been effectively captured by the Pulitzer Prize winning African-American author Alex Haley in his novel *Roots*. The author has traced his family history seven generations back and narrates the story of his forefather, Kunta Kinte, who was one of the victims of this forced migration, and also of his successors, who struggled hard in an attempt to carve a new African-American identity for themselves.

The story takes us back to the year 1750, to the village of Juffure on the coast of Gambia, in West Africa, when a boy was born to Omoro and Bintakinte, named Kunta Kinte, after his late grandfather, Kairaba Kunta Kinte, the village's holy man. Being the first born child he was specially adored by his grandmother Yaisa.

Going through the regular stages of African Childhood he goes about naked playing with his own age group children, his 'First Kafo' mates. On officially reaching the age limit of the 'Second Kafo' (five to nine rains old) not only were the boys given a long shirt, a 'dundiko', to wear, but were now expected to learn the art of goat-herding, which involved protecting the goats from the lions and the panthers, and also of learning the Koranic verses in the school yard under the strict supervision of the 'Arafang'.

It was then that Kunta, for the first time, became aware of the dangers of being caught by the white men, ‘the toubob’, and their black slatee helpers, who had already picked up nine boys from Juffure and many more from the neighbouring areas. They were regarded as a “worse danger than lions and panthers” (39). Old Nyo Boto, the revered village grandmother, also has a tragic story to relate of the armed white slave raiders with their black slatee helpers who had killed her two babies and aged mother because they were of no use to them.

The ruthless capture and torture by the Toubobs was slowly becoming more real and more threatening to Kunta with the retelling of his own father’s experience. Omoro related how he and his brothers had seen twenty great toubob canoes filled with things like dried indigo, cotton, beeswax and hides and also the captured native Africans, betrayed by their own people and “More terrible than he could describe...were the beatings and other cruelties ...being dealt out to those who had been captured for the toubob to take away” (70). He then admonished his son sternly, “Never be alone when you can help it...Never be out at night when you can help it. And day or night when you’re alone, keep away from any high weeds or bush if you can avoid it” (71). He also told his son to be aware of their own people who were helping the toubobs to satisfy their own greed, to capture their own brothers and sisters. “Many of our own people work for him. They are slatee traitors” (71). “For toubob money, we turn against our own kind...Greed and treason - these are the things toubob has given us in exchange for those he has stolen away” (136).

After having returned from his rigorous manhood training, when one day out in the forest, looking for suitable wood to make his drum, he heard a twig crack but by then it was too late and he was immediately surrounded by toubobs and their black helpers. Despite giving them a tough fight, he was captured when he fell unconscious. When he regained consciousness he found himself “Naked, chained shackled..... in a pitch darkness full of steamy heat and sickening stink and a nightmarish bedlam of shrieking, weeping, praying and vomiting” (166). He became aware of eleven other captured blacks with him some of whom were men, some were girls and some were children. Whipped, lashed, kicked, beaten, inspected physically, bleeding, tortured, struggling, balking, Kunta and the others were taken on board the ship and then began the nightmarish journey taking them away from their homeland to the unknown land of America.

At first he fought with his hunger, ready to starve himself to death rather than touch the ‘toubob’ food. There were other forms of revolts from the other black prisoners also. The toubobs imprisoned their black slatee helpers also, who were soon killed off by the other black prisoners for their treachery. One prisoner broke out in open revolt and killed off some toubobs before he himself was beheaded. A young woman, sick of being physically assaulted, herself jumped into the ocean preferring the deadly sharks to the lustful toubobs.

After lying for weeks in their own urine, faeces and vomit, amidst the gnawing rats and the stinging insects, the bodily conditions of the prisoners kept in the ship basement rapidly deteriorated. Many succumbed to death. To keep them alive the prisoners were brought up on the

deck where the stinging salty sea water was doused on their open, severed, sore cuts and wounds, and some ointment was seared onto them, from time to time.

After four and a half 'moons' the ship finally landed on American soil and the petrified, chained captives were compelled to disembark amidst the "dozens of toubob stamping, laughing, pointing in their excitement...alongside the jeering crowd, their massed smell like the blow of a giant fish...as the toubob crowd screamed in excitement"(210). Though Kunta's wild fantasy of being put into the cooking cauldron was not to come true, but the reality was no less gruesome.

Kunta was soon auctioned off, after being imprisoned for seven days and nights, for 850 dollars. He was paraded as an animal "Top prime -young and supple!"(216) exposing his teeth and "prodding him all over- under the armpits, on his back, his chest, his genitals"(216). "Bright as monkeys! Can be trained for anything!"(216). "Some of the younger toubob laughed, jeered, and poked at Kunta with sticks as they passed..."(217).

The indifference with which he was met by the other blacks, who were obviously the employees of the toubobs, pained Kunta even more. "My brother, you come from my country ..."(216). However, his dampened spirits soon revived when he thought that since he was now on firm ground, then even after being sold, he could attempt to escape. "Kunta knew only that he must escape from this dreadful place - or die in the attempt. He dared not dream that he would ever see Juffure again, but if he did, he vowed that all of the Gambia would learn what the land of toubob was really like"(224).

Even though Kunta had been given a new identity "Toby", by his new master, "Massa", he silently vouchsafed "...no matter how long he stayed among them...never to become like them....The toubob were inhuman, and as for the blacks, it was simply senseless to try to understand them"(238-239). But he did realize that he would have to learn something of the toubob speech as a survival tactic. Slowly, the other blacks on the plantation started showing their apathy towards Kunta only in the presence of the "massa" or the "oberseer" but otherwise they had expressions of concern and worry for Kunta, for his slowly festering ankle, due to the ankle cuffs that he still had to wear. Though Kunta did not respond to them yet, he was reminded of Africa, again and again, in their unconscious gestures and exclamations, the way:

These blacks moved their bodies...the way these blacks laughed when they were among themselves...in the way the black women here wore their hair tied up with strings into very tight plaits...the way that black children here were trained to treat their elders with politeness and respect...the way that mothers carried their babies.....these black's great love of singing and dancing was unmistakably African.(243-244)

Although even their African "Allah" had now transformed into the English "Oh Lawd!".

Kunta's attitude of aversion and maintaining his distance from the other blacks totally isolated him and was turning him into a recluse, so much so that he started holding imaginary conversations with his family:

...these black ones are not like us. Their bones, their blood, their sinews, their hands, their feet are not their own. They live and breathe not for themselves but for the toubob. Nor do they own anything at all, not even their own children. They are fed and nursed and bred for others...and many of them have lain down with the toubob, for I see their children who are cursed with the sasso-borro half color. (254-255)

Despite his three foiled ventures of escape, Kunta kept persisting, and collecting objects like food, knife and also a 'saphie charm' made from a cock's feather, horse's hair and a bird's wishbone, to make his fourth attempt fruitful. However, he couldn't hide for long and was soon discovered by the bloodhounds and the white slave catchers, and for his persistence he was this time rewarded by having the front half of his foot chopped off, maiming him for life, and thus effectively putting a stop to all hopes of escape, forever.

On recovering consciousness, after this painful amputation, Kunta now found himself in an altogether different plantation owned by a "massa" William Waller, who was a doctor and was able to nurse him through this ordeal to better health, with the help of his black cook and housekeeper, Bell. This master was a better man who did not believe in exploiting his black slaves and did not appoint an overseer for this purpose. Regaining his health slowly, and finally accepting the bitter truth that his destiny lay in making a living for himself in the toubob land, Kuntanow gradually started taking an interest in his surroundings. By now, he had become nineteen years old and was matured beyond his years, due to his traumatic experiences. He started work as a helper to the old and feeble gardener and one day replaced him to become a full-fledged gardener himself. He became friendly with the 'fiddler', a mulatto slave, who became his self-appointed tutor and his window into the toubob world, teaching him not only the language but also the ways and customs of the toubobs. He started mingling with the other black slaves even though he still maintained his reserve. Every evening after work, he would draw Arabic characters on the floor in order to hold on to his African learning. "Somehow his praying and studying made it all right to mix with them. That way, it seemed to him he could remain himself without having to remain by himself" (279). He still refused to participate in their Christmas festivities because it "seemed to involve their Allah"(286), and continued to abstain from drinking alcohol and eating the swine as demanded by the dictates of his own religion.

With the passing years he reconciled himself to his new life. He got many opportunities to run away but by now new experience had taught him that there was nowhere he could find asylum. He secretly also accepted the fact that he preferred this life to being captured and killed in his next attempt. "Deep in his heart, he knew he would never see his home again, and he could feel something precious and irretrievable dying inside of him forever. But hope remained alive,

though he might never see his family again perhaps someday he might be able to have one of his own”(287).

He now started observing and questioning the relationship of the white masters and their black slaves. He understood that they were compelled to follow their master but what pleasure did they derive from participating in the whites' festivities? Maybe, he surmised, that by now they had become so dependent on the whites that they had assimilated their culture too. He looked down on the others because they did not know the African way of life, were unaware of their glorious African heritage, till one day the 'fiddler' made him realize that it was due to no fault of theirs. "How you' spec we gon' know' bout Africa? We ain't never been dere an' ain't goin' neither!" (291). When Bell tells him about Miss Priscilla, Master Waller's wife, who died in childbirth, and as a consequence of which he had been left all alone. "Kunta listened, realizing that just as he was only beginning to appreciate the individual depths and dimensions of the black – ones, it had never occurred to him that even white folks could also have human sufferings, though their ways in general could never be forgiven" (295).

When Massa Waller's buggy driver Luther, is found guilty of the charge of helping a runaway house girl, he is handed over to the Sheriff and Kunta becomes the next driver, after now having spent 16 years on the plantation. Though he had now reached an envious position by the standard of the other black slaves, he was warned not to lose his head over his better prospects, which "was unnecessary advice for one who – even after all this time – found no dignity in anything he was made to do for the white man" (306).

His new job took him out of the plantation, and he got more opportunities to observe the toubob world at closer intervals. He saw black mothers nursing white babies along with their black ones, the white children exploiting their black playmates, but then later on both would lie down together to take naps. These sights served to confuse his pre conceived notions further, who "found it difficult to think of toubob as actual human beings...he'd never understand the toubob if he lived to a hundred rains"(311).

The shift in his thought patterns became more apparent and visible. Earlier he used to fret and fume at the miserable servile conditions of the blacks under the whites who were grossly ignorant if the fact that "they were a lost tribe, that any kind of respect or appreciation for themselves had been squeezed out of them so thoroughly that they seemed to feel that their lives were as they should be....But they didn't even seem to know that they were miserable"(271).But as his horizon widened, he heard stories of subtle revenges taken by the black people - of the cooks and maids serving food to white men containing their own bodily waste, or pieces of glass or poison; of the white babies dying because of the insertion of needles in their heads, of a white overseer found hung by a tree for having raped a black girl. Open black rebellion had never succeeded and by now Kunta was the first one to admit that "a rebellion could ever succeed against such overwhelming odds. Perhaps...blacks could outnumber whites, but they could never overpower them"(314).

Kunta had by now turned into a bitter realist, that though the blacks often complained about the injustice meted out to them but they hardly ever tried to protest or resist it. He was candid enough to confess to himself that he was also becoming one of them by yielding to this way of life but even this life now seemed precious and he did not want to risk it by fighting or running away.

Kunta's final resistance melted away after his encounter with the African qua-qua player he came across in Massa Waller's parents' home. They impulsively greeted each other in Arabic and embraced in the African fashion. The evening that Kunta spent with him made him feel as if he had been with his own father Omoro. They discussed their African pasts with a painful acceptance of something that was irretrievably lost to both of them and the elder Ghanian imparted his wisdom to Kunta in the following words, "You's young . Seeds you's got a – plenty, you jes' needs de wife to plant' em in"(327).

This encounter greatly perturbed Kunta and made him take stock of his current situation in life. "Day by day, year by year he had become less resisting, more accepting, until finally, without even realizing it, he had forgotten who he was...he was torn with guilt and shame about what he had let happen to himself...He had still been an African when his memories of The Gambia and its people had been the only thing that sustained him... he had still been an African back in those early years...imploring Allah to give him strength and understanding; how long had it been since he had even properly prayed to Allah?"(328).

He conceded that learning the toubob tongue had made him forgetful of his Mandinka ways. With a great painful effort he could dimly recall the names and faces of his childhood friends and some of the village elders. The flood of memories brought joy mingled with the painful realization that he could never go back to Juffure and never see them again.

This painful turmoil going on inside him, segregated him from his black comrades for some months altogether, so that feeling snubbed, they also stopped responding to him. This state of affairs could not last long as "feeling inexpressibly lonely, as if he had cut himself from the world" (330) Kunta tried to make amends for his rude behaviour. Egged on by the advice of his closest black friends and also of the elderly Gambian, Kunta finally decided to tie the knot and settle down in his new homeland. After thinking considerably about it he decided to get married to Bell. The marriage ceremony took place according to the Christian tradition, much to the distaste of Kunta, who felt suffocated in comparing it with the marriages conducted in Juffure. Nevertheless he found himself a happier and contented man trying to make the best of things. He now developed a strong empathy with all the blacks who, "felt - and hated - no less than he the oppressiveness under which they all lived", and about which they were powerless to make any amends whatsoever.

In this way, even though a victim of forced migration Kunta, under his new identity 'Toby', finally accepted and assimilated the American way of life as the only way left open to

him. His successive generations continued to thrive and multiply, initially as slaves like him, and then later on as 'free blacks' with the changing political, social and economic American scenario, until seven generations later Alex Haley, the author, finally decided to trace back his family origin right up to his African heritage. He was finally successful in his endeavours, after facing many difficulties and challenges, and was thus able to bring alive the story of the painful migration and transformation of his fore-father, the African Kunta Kinte, into the American 'Toby'.

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