



## History and Fiction: Representation of Slavery in Select Novels (A Study of *Beloved*, *Roots* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*)

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Received : November 2014

Accepted : March 2015

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**Abstract :** *The present study is related to the discourse of slavery in the fiction of Toni Morrison, Alex Haley and Harriet Beecher Stowe. The relationship between fiction and history is multidimensional. Both fiction and history use narrative forms, configure events referring to the same world considering the context often adopting similar strategies in the pursuit of the actual event. Yet these writers progress differently, raise different expectations and have a different relationship with the reader. Literature often gives new perspectives to the reading of history. Many novelists have rewritten the history of slavery from the angle of a neglected and often voiceless race.*

*But in case of these writers history and fiction delight in their difference as it is this difference alone which allows them to borrow and yet strive to move beyond the likeness, to explore the hidden dimensions of the known 'reality'. Thus, this article unfolds the hidden reality of known facts.*

**Key words:** *Black identity, history, fiction, resistance and slavery.*

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### Introduction :

Subjugation of man by man has existed since time immemorial. In recent times the institutionalized dehumanization of enslaved African subject on American soil has been the subject of great historical and literary discussion. Historical novelists have often been found to be more adept at communicating issues of oppression, memory and identity than the ivory-towered historical theorists.

Literature has made society aware of exploitive and decaying institutions like slavery and has acted as an instrument of social change. A fictional account of the interior life of a slave might be more historically real than actual documents

which were often written from the perspectives of the dominant culture. The most influential slave narratives were designed to enlighten white readers about both the realities of slavery as an institution and the humanity of Black people as individuals deserving full human rights.

The research article entitled "History and Fiction: Representation of Slavery in Select Novels" aims to analyse the reshaping of the discourse of slavery in fiction. Literature often gives new perspectives to the reading of history. It has made society aware of exploitative and decaying institutions like slavery and acted as an instrument of social change. We propose to study this phenomenon through three different novels: *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison, *Roots* (1976) by Alex Haley and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe.

***Beloved***- *Beloved* is a milestone in the chronicling of Black experience in America and was considered by Linda Krumholz as "a stunning and lasting achievement which transforms the sorrows of history into the luminous truth of art." (395)

*Beloved* is both a reconstruction of true events and an elaborate multidimensional re-imagination of the Black slave experience specially told through modern lens. Morrison's protagonist, Sethe, is modelled upon the real life historical figure of Margaret Garner, who in 1851 murdered her baby daughter rather than submitting her to slavery.

Morrison explores the theme of love, family and self-possession in a world where slavery has only recently become a thing of the past. Set during the Reconstruction Era in 1873, *Beloved* focuses on the power of memory and history. For the former slaves in the novel, the past is a burden that they desperately and willingly try to forget. Sethe and Paul D, the protagonists of the novel are trying to create lives for themselves in the wake of

decimating and pervasive personal histories. Both are forever marked by the legacy of their individual experiences with American slavery. Past memories continue to haunt Sethe, literally, in the spirit of her deceased daughter. The novel, thus, records both the victimization of ex-slaves and asserts the healing wholeness in their communal lives. It uses the conception of history derived from the call and response patterns of memory and communal nature of art that is an important part of Black tradition.

In *Beloved* Morrison creates a powerful commentary on the psychological and historical legacy of slavery. Attempting to historicize the traumatic experience of slavery, it also seeks to explore human relationships within and across race and gender. Marilyn Sanders Mobley, a critic has aptly remarked: "*Beloved* revises the classic slaves narratives by providing access to a sort of psychological integrity hitherto undocumented." (356)

*Beloved* challenges the notion that the end of institutionalized slavery brings about freedom by depicting its emotional and psychological scars as well as a persistence of racism. It is an attempt by Morrison to provide an alternate to Eurocentric accounts of history, especially slavery. The newspaper account of Sethe's deed clearly shows that textual documents often fail to capture life as it is experienced. Morrison describes her narrative strategy in *Beloved* as a 'kind of literary archaeology' it offers a radical re-visioning of the official history that has often ignored the 'other history' which runs beneath it.

Morrison has successfully employed racial history as raw material for recovery literature. She has written Sethe's story with the voice of the people who have been denied the power of legacy. In conclusion we may say that, Morrison has almost rediscovered history in this seminal work.

The novel demonstrates how reconstruction of the past makes possible the re-conceptualizing of the future which is the result of history making.

**Roots** is a family saga that tells the story of Kunta Kinte, an 18<sup>th</sup> Century African captured as an adolescent and sold into slavery in the United states and follows his life and the lives of his descendants down to Haley. The novel is based on the family history of the author himself. Starting with Kunta Kinte's traumatic capture and tracing an African-American family through slavery, the Civil War, and the complex transition into freedom. Haley's work on the novel involved ten years of research, intercontinental visits and writing.

In addition to treating the obvious subjects of slavery, Black identity and the power of oral history, *Roots* celebrates the triumph of human spirit over cruelty and the strength of family connections. Furthermore it challenged many Americans' long held beliefs that Blacks were intellectually inferior with no history or culture worth recognizing.

In presenting this story as a novel, Haley has maximised its popular appeal and captured the spirit of its oral traditional. In fact *Roots* may be regarded as the first serious challenge to existing popular myth on the Black man's past that Blacks are without a past, without a culture of their own and therefore, an inferior and worthless people. It emphasized that Afro- Americans have a long history and that not all of that history is necessarily lost, as many believed. *Roots* represents a counter history not only by supplementing the master narrative with the subaltern's perspective but also in its situation of being something other than history in the conventional sense. It gave Blacks something they had been lacking in American popular culture: a history with human face.

**Uncle Tom's Cabin** -Few novels in American history have grabbed the public spotlight and

caused as great uproar as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This anti-slavery documentary was written by a white woman named Harriet Beecher Stowe. The novel pictures the period before the American Civil War and it made a great contribution towards refreshing public opinion towards the abolition of slavery. According to Will Kaufman, the novel 'helped lay the background of the Civil War.'(18)

The novel provides a dramatic description of the inherent cruelty of slavery while also asserting that Christian love can overcome something as destructive as enslavement of fellow human beings. The triumph of the novel is not merely that it shows the widespread experience of slavery in the South, rather it also shows the personal tragedy that the system causes.

This is particularly true of the title character, Uncle Tom, who retains his integrity and refuses to betray his fellow slaves even at the cost of his life. His firm Christian principles in the face of brutal treatment made him a hero to the Whites. In contrast, his tormenter Simon Legree, the Northern slave dealer turned plantation owner enraged them with his cruelty. Stowe convinced people that the institution of slavery itself was evil because it supported people like Legree and enslaved people like Tom.

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* was written for a specific purpose: to demonstrate the "living dramatic reality" of slavery, as Beecher Stowe put it since the lofty language of the Declaration of Independence, which promised "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" to all Americans, had fallen far short of reality. It became an important weapon in the abolitionist's fight against slavery by giving the northerners their closest look at slavery and provided an undeniable counter to the pro-slavery arguments and idyllic pictures of slavery described by slaveholders.

The novel also critiques the fact based history that had dominated the western intellectual tradition by giving us a glimpse into the life of slave communities: the love between family members, the respect for elders, and the bond between friends. It described an enduring African American culture which was expressed through music, folktales and religion.

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* has found a permanent place in American history. The critic Henry Louis Gates Jr. states that the book is a "central document in American race relations and a significant moral and political exploration of the character of those relations." (44) The novel thus, approves of the role of fiction as an instrument of social change.

### **Conclusion :**

This research aims to analyse the discourse of slavery in fiction and to trace its patterns vis-a-vis, the historical representation of slavery as an institution. The relationship between fiction and history is multi-foliate. Both fiction and history use narrative forms, configure events, refer to the same world context and often adopt similar strategies in the pursuit of the actual event. Yet they progress differently, raise different expectations and have a different relationship with the reader. Again, though both seek to represent the 'real' and the 'truth', the reality and truth of each is different. Noted critic, Jasbir Jain has aptly remarked in this context:

"While history is dominantly concerned with the pastness of the past as it was lived at one time, fiction enters the past in order to bring it to the present, and accordingly time and memory and their negotiation of temporality function differently." (27)

In the novels selected for this study - *beloved*, *roots*, *uncle tom's cabin* - history has been used as an important context of the novel for they deal with

one theme, that is, slavery, which is firmly entrenched in the historical milieu of America. At the same time, we see that unlike the historian's dependence on the documents and excavations as his major source of substantiation, the novelist's dependence on these sources is, in a way, limited and he is mainly guided by his creative imagination. While history can not abandon its internal logic, coherence and linearity, fiction is free to cross these boundaries and to resist closure.

Thus, we see that fiction has the advantage over traditional histories of falling back on experience, inherited knowledge, psychological conscience, family histories or moral values for that matter. It can also indulge in pure imagination and enter into a debate on abstractions such as freedom, justice, and moral norms. We may call historical novels as products of a speculative engagement with history.

To conclude we may say that fiction has the capacity to be present in our present, not only in the past. Many novelists have rewritten the history of slavery from the angle of a neglected and often voiceless race. Similar yet different, history and fiction delight in their difference because it is this difference alone which allows them to borrow and yet strive to move beyond the likeness, to explore the hidden dimensions of the known 'reality'.

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