



# **PORTRAYAL OF ALEX HALEY'S A DIFFERENT KIND OF CHRISTMAS AS AN ANTI-SLAVERY NARRATIVE**

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## **Abstract:**

African American literature has the works with the predominant themes of slavery, black identity, and black consciousness. There is also a sub genre called slave narrative that includes the works of former slaves. The narration of African American history has been a tool to redefine the past history of the slaves. The works of the Black writers focus on their agony, loss of identity, culture, and tradition. The works further documents the historical events connected with slavery to freedom in the land of America. African American literature, thus records the life of slaves from their bondage to the free life. Alex Haley's works illustrate the journey of the Blacks from native land of Africa to the new dignified identity in America. His novel *A Different Kind of Christmas*, portray the anti-slavery movement in America and the role of the Whites and Blacks in the movement. This historical novel presents the change of heart of the white man from the pro slavery ideology to anti slavery views. The present paper aims at the portrayal of anti slavery movement in the novel.

**Key Words:** Anti slavery movement, slave trade, fugitive slaves, Underground rail road, abolitionists  
**Full Paper:**

African American literature has the works with the predominant themes of slavery, black identity, and black consciousness. There is also a sub genre called slave narrative that includes the works of former slaves. The narration of African American history has been a tool to redefine the past history of the slaves. The works of the Black writers focus on their agony, loss of identity, culture, and tradition. The works further documents the historical events connected with slavery to freedom in the land of America. African American literature, thus records the life of slaves from their bondage to the free life. The black experience has been narrated by many writers from the slavery period to the present. When the black people had the opportunity to learn the English language, they had been eager to produce lots of works expressing their past and present experience. Such writings are the reason to develop confidence and pride in the minds of other blacks. Alex Haley's works illustrate the journey of the Blacks from native land of Africa through the agony of slavery to the new dignified identity in America. His novel *A Different Kind of Christmas*, portray the anti-slavery movement in America and the role of the Whites and Blacks in the movement. This historical novel presents the change of heart of the white man from the pro slavery ideology to anti slavery views. The present paper aims at the portrayal of anti slavery movement in the novel.

The slave narratives are the works depicting the agony of slavery and the after years of slavery tradition. The new slave narratives deal with the historical events of the slavery tradition- the enslavement of the African people to the freedom of slaves in America. The long history of the blacks has been told by many writers filled with facts and fiction.

Alex Haley is one such writer to write on slavery, anti-slavery movements, and the Black identity. His works *Roots, the Saga of an American Family* and *Queen: the story of an American Family* narrates the history of his great grandfather and great grandmother respectively. His works *A Different Kind of Christmas* and *Mama Flora's Family* deal with the anti-slavery movement of America. The change of heart in the White people has been well portrayed in these novels.

The novel *A Different Kind of Christmas* tells the story of Fletcher Randall, the heir of a big plantation in North Carolina. The story narrates the young white man's life from White supremacy to the anti-slavery ideology. The change of attitude towards the Blacks has been well expressed by the author.

*A Different Kind of Christmas* is set in Ashe County, North Carolina and in Philadelphia at the time of the anti-slavery movement in the Northern America. The novel comprises the Slave South and free North part of America. It shows the pro-slavery views of plantation owners and the anti-slavery ideas of the former slaves and sensible Whites in the North. The characters of Alex Haley form a medley of different people from different walks of life, with different viewpoints. But all are connected to the sufferings of slavery. The novel is set in the time period of the 1830s, just before the Civil War. It is filled with references to Fugitive slave laws, Underground Railroad, the writings of former slaves such as Frederick Douglass and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Alex Haley highlights how the Whites realize the injustice done to the Blacks and the role of the Whites in the abolishment of slavery in America.

The history of slavery dates back to the ancient days in human history. Slavery in America started during the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. The ethnic people of the African continent had been captured by the Europeans and sold as slaves in America. Every White man possessed slaves to work in the farms and houses. The era witnessed the luxurious life of the Whites as well as the pathetic survival of the slaves. The White men considered the Blacks as their property and they had believed that the Blacks are inferior to the Whites. The Black people had lost their name, religion, culture, and tradition along with their freedom to live. The fate of the slaves in the new land had been decided by the White masters. The slaves were prohibited to read and write. The Black children were not supposed to read and write as the White children. The Black men worked like animals in the fields where as the Black women worked in the fields and houses. They were tormented by the White masters. The Black women were the victims of sexual harassments. At one point, the protest of the Black people was initiated. In some farms, the White master was killed. The slaves started escaping from the plantations. There were some Whites who could understand the injustice done to the Blacks, and those people helped the slaves to come out of the clutches of slavery and lead a free dignified life.

The White men helped the slaves through the Underground Railroad, a system to escape the slaves from the farms to the North parts of America. This has been famous at the time of the 1830s in America. The abolition of slavery has started in the Northern America whereas the Southern plantation owners had a number of slaves as their property. The Fugitive slave law helped the white owners to claim their slaves wherever they escape. Some White men and former slaves have started helping the slaves to escape. There are patrol men at work to watch and stop the escape of slaves from the farms. The Underground Railroad has been mentioned in the novel *A Different Kind of Christmas* as a group of Whites and Blacks crusading for the free life of slaves.

The novel brings out the contrasting views of Southerners and Northern Whitemen about slavery. Fletcher and his family represent the Southerner's view on Slavery. The three Quaker brothers denote the anti-slavery views of the Northern America. They advocate the equal rights and freedom for the slaves.

Fletcher the heir of a huge plantation goes to North America for his studies. He is teased by other students for his southern accent. The Quaker brothers become friends with him. Fletcher is not interested in moving with them because of their hatred for slavery. He is not ready to talk about slaves and slavery with them. When the three brothers invite Fletcher for a trip to their house in Philadelphia, he readily accepts as he is eager to meet different people. He does not know that this trip would be a turning point in his life.

Fletcher is welcomed by the parents of the Quakers. He has met a Black man Mr. Fortas, a former slave. He shook hands with Fletcher who has been startled by his first experience with an equal Black man. Alex Haley narrates his experience, "Fletcher almost collapsed as if shot. He felt his face flush hot as the Black man shook his hands. As if he were an equal!" (20).

Fletcher's White consciousness makes him feel irritated and agitated. He has never seen any Black man living equally with the Whites. This is the first time he sees a Black man without fear and hesitation. He has

felt embarrassed: “Fletcher’s right hand felt indelibly soiled. Involuntarily, he showed the hand deeply who has right pants pocket. He was experiencing such mixed embaraassment and fury that the event thought of springing from the carriage down onto the cobbestoned street to find his way back to the college” (21). He labels this experience as “intolerable” (21). It clearly shows the attitude of Whites against the Blacks.

Mr. Eugene Ellis, father of Quaker brothers takes his family outside to see Philadelphia’s famous historical places. He explains everything clearly to Fletcher. Fletcher thus comes to know that the Blacks in Philadelphia has abandoned the slavish attitude and they live along eith the whites without any colour prejudice. Fletcher has been taken to the worship place of Quakers. He sees the blacks sitting equally to the whites in the place. He is more disturbed and feels ‘heart-burn’. The whites are propagating about the cruelty of slavery. He experienced agitation within him. He wanted to shout “he himself treated their treasured house slaves practically as members of their family” (27).

Because of his agitation in mind, Fletcher has left the Quaker’s house without saying a word. But he feels sorry for his sudden absence from the place. He returns to Philadelphia with the determination to experience the same again. He apologizes Quaker family. He meets Mr. Fortas again and asks for his forgiveness. He goes to the worship place and meets former slaves and listens to their experiences. He understands the cruelty of slavery. Thus the trip to Philadelphia has brought psychological changes in him.

Fletcher starts reading about the laws regarding slavery. In the moral class, Prof. Lincoln distributes a letter written by Fredrick Douglass. The experience of Douglass as a slave and as a freeman has been written thus: “There should be as before as 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” (30). The words of Douglass change the notion of slavery in Fletcher. These words trigger anti-slavery ideology in Fletcher. He decides to read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* a famous Black writing of that time. But the Southerners consider that work as writing against their idea of slavery. Fletcher never discloses these experiences in his letter to his father.

The words of Douglass haunted him and so Fletcher wants to help the slaves. He goes to Vigilance Office in Philadelphia and meets Mr. McDonald, director of Vigilance committee and Clay Marlon, the chief conductor. Fletcher narrates his past notion on slavery and his present experience to McDonald. He expresses his willingness to work with them to help the slaves to come out of their slavery. He joins as a Station Master in Underground Rail road as secret employee.

Underground rail road has got its name from an incident when a slave named Tice Davids escaped through the River Ohio; it is believed that he has escaped because of the Underground rail road which had been under construction at that time. The escape of any slave with the help of former slaves or whites has been considered as Underground Rail road system thereafter. The system has started using the phrases related to railroad as secret codes within them.. ‘Stations’ are safe places to stay. ‘Station masters’ are the people who help the escaped slaves to stay safely in their places. ‘Conductors’ are persons who help the slaves to escape and reach a safe place. There are many secret routes and different stops in the journey. Fletcher has seen the photographs of many White men who had laid their lives for the sake of the freedom of the Blacks. When the White men who help the slaves to escape had been caught by the White plantation owners, they had been treated worse and tortured severely till death. Such white men who help the blacks are considered as traitors to the community.

Fletcher returns to his home for Christmas holidays. It is planned to help his slaves to escape on the Christmas eve. He has arranged for a party on the Christmas eve. He has planned to organize all the plantation owners together for the party so that there will be less patrol to watch the slaves. Senator Randell discusses political scenario of Northern states with him. His father has no idea of his change of attitude and his helping tendency towards the Fugitive slaves. Fletcher is tormented between his love for his family and his mission to help the blacks. He does not want to lose his family after the completion of the mission. But he is not sure that his family would accept his reasons in helping the slaves.

Fletcher’s reminiscence about the boy Rabbit, has been a powerful trigger to the total change of heart. Rabbit was the son of Old Hattie. He was named as Rabbit as he was able to run fast as rabbit. Once fletcher Rabbit had been suffering from fever. Old Hattie had taken care of Fletcher and he recovered from his illness.. but the black mother did not care for her own son and so Rabbit had died of fever. The black women are supposed to work for the Whites and they have to look after the White master’s children. This past experience has made the mind of Fletcher to help his Black mother to come out of slavery.

Fletcher meets his partner in the mission. He is shocked to know that it is a black man named Harpin’ John. He had been expecting his partner from the Vigilance office. When Harpin’John asks the

secret code to him, he is shocked. The secret code has been “Am I your brother? (79) For which Fletcher replies “Yes, I am your brother” (79). Both of them are shocked to know their present state and their mission. They decide to trust each other and think about the people who are going to lead a free life.

The secret mission has some problem when the plantation owners suspect some secret activity among the slaves. The security is tightened. No one suspects Fletcher as he is the future owner of the plantation. He has changed the plan of escape to the day of Christmas. When Harpin’ John is traced as the partner of the crime, Fletcher runs to help him. He also helps the slaves to reach a safe place. He is sure that he will be considered as a traitor not only for his family but for the community also. Fletcher at last decides to go to Philadelphia where he has friends. His decision to live as an individual not as a plantation owner has been the drastic change in his personality. His pride of White supremacy has been shattered through his experience with Quaker brothers. Mr Fortas, Prof. Lincoln, Harpin’John and his reading of Douglass’ letters and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

The novel *A Different Kind of Christmas* has the plot narrated inter connecting all the historical events of that time. It is an anti-slavery narrative as it brings out the secret missions of Underground Railroad to get rid of slavery. Alex Haley shows the work of the committee to help the fugitive slave to lead a dignified life. The novel emphasizes the role of White men in the abolishment of slavery through the characters of Quaker brothers, Mr. Eugene Ellis, Mr. McDonald, Mr. Clay Marlon and Prof. Lincoln. The change of slavish attitude in the Blacks and the emergence of the Blacks as a free human being with a dignified identity are shown through the character of Mr. Fortas. The involvement of the Blacks in getting freedom to their community is represented by Harpin’ John and his endeavour to save the Blacks from the White masters. The remarkable anti-slavery literature is also found a place in the novel as a motivation to the readers irrespective of their colour and race. The revelation caused by such literature is also well explained through the psychological changes experienced by Fletcher. Thus Alex Haley has depicted the historical events of anti-slavery movements with a fictional and emotional plot.

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