

Racism and Identity in Alexander Haley's *Roots*:
The Saga of an American Family

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Alex Haley (1921-1992)

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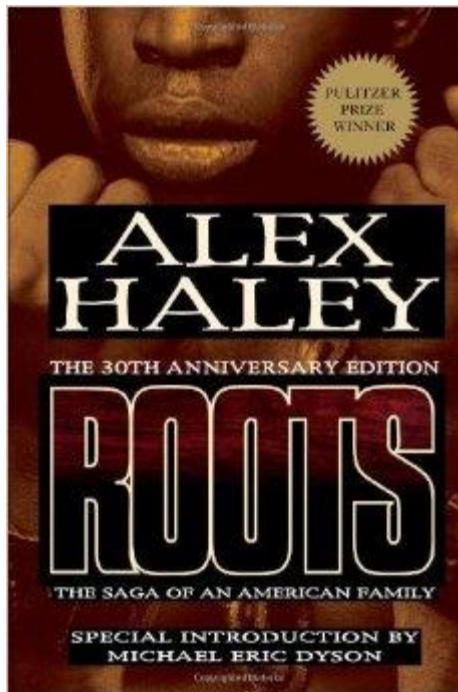
Abstract

As literature is a human art, it deals with man's interests and struggle with life. The twentieth century literature reflected the situation of the colored people in United States. The most significant genre which deals with human issues with an impressive and careful depiction of environment, characters and issues involved is the novel. The novel gives a realistic atmosphere to the story which is significant in understanding the issue with the author's point of view, as a result, the novel as a literary work could represent everyday life and its condition. So through this paper, I am going to discuss the notion of racism and its impact on the forming of black identity in two societies: American and South African in the twentieth century through a great novel *Roots: the saga of an American Family*. The novel had a great success, not only in America, but all over the world especially when it was realized in a TV series. It is based on the Alex Haley's family story which he learns from his grandmother. Furthermore, the author had some investigations and found that many parts of what his grant mother told him were true.

Keywords: Alex Haley, family story, TV series, racism, identity, segregation, community oppression

Alex Haley

Alexander Murray Palmer Haley (1921-1992) is an American novelist and biographer who was born in Ithaca, New York, and raised in the small town of Henning, Tennessee. Alexander Haley is one of the African American writers who used autobiography to express his experience and a family experience through a long and hard saga. He started it from the origin (Africa), and how Africans were kidnapped to bring them into America. The author tried, through his novel, to tell the whites: Yes, I am from Africa, and we (African Americans) were originated from Africa. We are different, but we still considered as Americans as well as Africans. In this paper, I will strive to show how Haley expressed his view as an author toward racism in America and how blacks kept their identity in the New World scene. This is through his novel of *Roots* which express more the relation between the African American and their history in Africa, and what they went through in America for centuries.



Desired: Social Reform and Respect of the Other

Alexander Haley being a famous writer and biographer, he wants behind his writings a social reform and respect of the other, and the cure for social ills, which are known as "racial segregation". Haley is also well known for his *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, the description of the adventure of a kidnapped African in America and the story of his children and grand-grandchildren which the author belongs to. The author, like a lot of black authors at that time, used the biography as a means to gain some sympathy and authenticity to his work. As far as the novel was considered as a plagiarism, this does not deny the fact that it represents a lot of African American aspects, neither deny the literary value of the work.

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Interest in Ancestor Story/History - *Roots*

His interest in what his grandmother used to tell him about his African ancestor, or what he called it "my furthest-back person" (Haley, *My Furthest-Back Person - The African: The Inspiration for Roots* 12), inspired him to begin working on his next project, *Roots*. The tale follows the life of Kunta Kinte, a proud African who was kidnapped from his village in West Africa. After surviving the middle passage from Africa to America in the worst conditions that a person could go through, he was made a slave on a plantation in the United States. Haley visited archives, libraries, and research repositories on three continents to make the book as authentic as possible. He even reenacted Kunta's experience during the middle passage by spending a night in the hold of a ship stripped to his underwear. Haley's attitude toward following the African ancestor did much to enhance his popularity because it was after Malcolm X Biography which is based on a person who rejected the American name given to his family and replace it by an X to symbolize his ignorance of his ancestry.

Racial Segregation and Apartheid

As we know how the United States passed through a racial separation periods, beginning with slavery till the twentieth century "racial Segregation". Unlike the South African Apartheid system, the American racial separation has *Roots* to centuries of slavery and white dominance era. The blacks have been always considered as servants and inferior to whites because of the white's authority in America through centuries over the blacks. And even African Americans consider themselves as imposed immigrants. As literature was a domain of white's authority too, black literature was their way to end this dominance and protest against what they saw as oppression.

In a completely different vein, Haley's genius for the biography as a means of revealing human experience and sympathy opens up a new world of imagining in the Saga of an American Family. It shows what he saw as "Roots of Racism" (Ross) by telling the story from the beginning to make it clearer. Also, he was influenced by the African oral tradition which he claims that his family still preserves.

Roots

Roots is one of Alex Haley famous novels. It was written in 1971 as a mixture of fiction and facts as Haley himself claims (Alex Haley biography). The novel is set in two different spaces one in Africa and the other one in America through almost three hundred years. *Roots* is the story of Kunta Kinte, an African from the Mandinka tribe from the small village of Juffure, Gambia, in West Africa, and his American descendants. Kunta Kinte was "the African" whose Haley's grandmother and ancestors told the story of. *Roots*, imaginatively, recites the life of Kunta Kinte in Africa, his capture into slavery in 1676, and his experiences as a slave in Spotsylvania, Virginia. Kunta refused to forget his African heritage and adopt the ways and customs of his white masters or even the name they gave him. He made attempts to escape from slavery which was considered for him as an insult; however, in his fourth try, his foot was severed by a slave-catcher. He later married Bell, the slave cooks in the big house on the plantation, and they had a daughter named Kizzy. Kunta taught Kizzy since her childhood the sounds of his native African language and reciting of her African ancestry.

Kizzy and Children – Third Generation

At the age of fifteen, Kizzy was sold to a master whose rape of his new young slave resulted in the birth of the third generation, George, who in turn learned of his African heritage through the stories of his mother. George, known as “Chicken George” for his success as a gamecock trainer, fathered eight children with Mathilda. His fourth son, Tom, was the father of Haley's maternal grandmother, Cynthia, who was taken to Henning, Tennessee, on a wagon train of freed slaves. In Henning, Cynthia met and married Will Palmer and had a daughter named Bertha, who married Simon Haley: these were Haley's parents.

Retelling and Resistance

For the contemporary people and critics, the re-going of the *Roots* provides a "deracination" (Athey 170). However, the presenting of the point of view of a slave who is criticizing his master would make another option to the novel. It would not just the retelling of the past, but it opens another level of resistance. The text "describe and critique the conditions of post-modernity, as they perform or contest new permutations of "race" or racial thinking in response to those conditions, or as they simply collapse back into those conditions" (170). The novel goes back in time to another space and time which is not relevant to the present time. But it expresses what could help the modern times by establishing this "America to Africa connection"(173).

Relations between the Races

Roots, like any other novel of African American, is centered on the relation between the races illustrated by the story of an African family in America through seven generations. It started with the first grandfather in his native land, Africa and how they kidnapped him by whites and blacks slave traders. This makes him remember what he heard in his village about the slave kidnapping. "One of the elders said when they were discussing the slaves' kidnappings 'As a child I saw these slates beating those like themselves to walk faster for the toubab!'" (*Roots*, 160). Blacks were aware that the ones who were kidnapping blacks from Africa and sell them to the whites were 'blacks'. However, they did never reproach the blacks and always blame the whites for addicting blacks to betray their race and help the "toubab"(whites) kidnap their brothers.

Even more, they have no hope for the whites to change; they believe that whites are purely evil and could not change until "the river flows backward!" (160). This could be considered as a racist act toward whites by the blacks who saw them as animals. Another way of racism against whites was the way that blacks were acting toward Jankeh Jallon's baby who was strange pale tan color like a cured hide and had very odd hair [as he was a result of white's rape to Jankeh Jallon after kidnapping her, but she escaped from them] ...and wherever Jankeh Jallon would appear thereafter, people would look at the ground and hurry elsewhere. (182)

When she asked for a solution to the council, they just said they would have to weigh the matter until the next Council meeting and feel pity for the child because of his father's origin as it was a shame for them to have a white father. The mixed blood children seen as poor and have no chance to be a part of the black community. Even in the United States, the mixed blood children are seen as half African and do not belong to the black community neither the white one. “At least I’m black, not brown like

you!" (316), was Kunta Kinte answer toward a mixed blood slave in the plantation, he showed a complete pride to be black, and a complete racism toward anything not black.

The Attitude of Hating Whites

The attitude of hating whites is due to what blacks are suffering from under white's dominance and authority, or just seeing what whites do to their black brothers. Furthermore, Kunta Kinte point of view toward whites starts since his childhood, but it reaches its peak when he is kidnapped by slave traders in the thirty third chapter when he is searching for materials in order to make a drum for his young brother.

The description of how whites hunt the black slaves is savage. They act as if they are hunting an animal. And the hunted man is reacting like an animal in a conversation where there are "no words than the blood and club" (193-194). Even when they are selling them, whites describe blacks as animals, such as: "Works like a mule!" or, "Bright as monkeys!" (249-250), and even when they want to buy one, they examine him/her as if they are going to buy a pet: "with short sticks and whip butts, they were examining them without touching them" (250). Even the trip from Africa to America is not a five-star trip. Naked, chained, shackled, find himself in pitch darkness. "He is bitten for four days without mercy. Finding himself gagged, blindfolded, and bound with his wrists behind him and his ankles hobbled with knotted rope"(197). All those strange actions make Kunta, the proud African of his holy ancestor who is labeled after, feels to be humiliated and disrespected. Racism led to the emergence of new feeling to the hero: alienation, the feeling to be an outsider. "An outsider—one who had been born free" (370).

Difference between Slavery in Africa and Slavery in America

Furthermore, the difference between slavery in Africa and slavery in America confuses Kunta. In Africa, slaves are like servants, and they have some rights. But in America, they are half humans and merely animals, they have no rights, and their freedom is limited, besides the presence of a lot of rules to obey without having the right to rebel. Kunta, unlike the blacks born and lived in the New World, could not imagine himself remain as a slave for a life time, tries four times to escape, but at the last try, he is caught and cut his half right leg by the slave catchers. This reaction is too normal reaction for someone who is decent to a famous family, and who have a great respect through his tribe and the whole country. This pride continues to be Present with his grandchildren with the existing of racism, although they became familiar with the situation. Such as how Chicken George did answers his master when he starts blaming blacks to be ingratitude for whites who feed, clothe and host them. But Chicken George answers him with a frank answer without any fear by saying: "You wants de straight, up-an'-down truth, Massa, I b'lieves mos' niggers figger dey's bein' smart to act maybe dumber'n dey really is, 'cause mos' niggers is scairt o' white folks" (602).The fear from whites is rooted to whites who imposed this view of black inferiority since their childhood where the black child should always be the servant of the white child, and always be in less position of him. Like when the master asked Bell to prepare a pallet for her daughter Kizzy at the foot of his niece's bed.

Difference between the Labels

Another type of racism is the difference between the labels. Whites are considered as "Masters" and "Missis" even they do not own the blacks or even know them directly. To be a white means directly that s/he is a superior human which must be respected and addressed with respect. However, blacks are

considered as slaves and servants for the whites even when they are freed they could not own their work and be safe until they worked for a white (783). Also, they have to be named after their master, and whenever they changed their masters by slave trade, their names changed. For example, when Kizzy lives with her parents in Master Hamilton plantation, she used to be named as Kizzy Hamilton, but when Master Lea owns her, she becomes Kizzy Lea.

Several Aspects of the Concept of Racism

All in all, the concept of racism was discussed in *Roots* through several aspects. First of all, slavery was the main racist act revealed in the novel. Then, the labeling of slaves by their master's names is a hint that they belong to them. Also, the relation of servant, ex-slave, slave and master which is based on the blacks' inferiority is also a type of racism. The period where the blacks lives after the collapse of the slavery system is also an important period that the author mentioned, although does not focus a lot on.

Black identity is everywhere in *Roots*, and its presence continues well through the whole novel by the remembrance and continuity of the remembering of their grandfather, his captive story and coming to America. The invention of a new tradition in America, which is originated to African tradition, where the family is gathered to hear the ancestors' story, expresses their clutch on their history. Since their first coming, Black Africans still recognized themselves for their tribes through physical appearances: tattoos and facial features. Nonetheless, they considered themselves as brothers as united by the colour of skin rather than their fathers' origins. Kinte way of seeing things and pride of their beauty which no other specie would be like them is expressed through his dislike of the white women: after seeing the hungry way the toubob on the great canoe had lusted after black women, he was amazed to see that the toubob had women of their own; but looking at this specimen, he could understand why they preferred Africans (243).

We can notice that his reaction is due to his background that praises the blackness and linked it with beauty as his father told him that "the more blackness a woman has the more beautiful she is"(57). Furthermore, his pride to bear his name was immeasurable. He wanted to shout, "I am Kunta Kinte, first son of Omoro, who is the son of the holy man Kairaba Kunta Kinte!" (269) when the whites gave him the name of Toby. What Kunta Kinte tells his daughter about Africa is due to his own experience as a child. His grandfather who bore the same name and Kunta became proud of it. As a kind of a way to preserve their history, Kunta wants to remain his story too to be told for his grandchildren as a kind of imitating the oral tradition of Africa.

Kunta's sticking to his religion, Islam, is a way to protest against anything white. He even becomes more related to it, but when he becomes engaged in white's world, he becomes less religious, and this makes him sad and starts blaming the white man's way of living. However, the others who become christened did remain religious like any ordinary African who is famous to be religious rather than to be faithful to just one religion. To be religious is not the only thing that made them look like Africans, even their way of singing and dancing as Kunta Kinte notices:

... Kunta saw that the dancers' footsteps and body motions were imitating their planting of the crops, the chopping of wood, the picking of cotton, the swinging of scythes, the

pulling of corn, the pitch forking of hay into wagons. It was all so much like the harvest dancing back in Juffure.... (329)

Looking Down Upon African Immigrants

Like their white masters, these plantation-born blacks seemed to take it for granted that those who had come from Africa had just climbed down from the trees, let alone had any experience whatever with education. However, when they discover that what they were thinking was wrong, they became interested in learning more about Africa. Like what happened to Bell who is always thinking of Africa as a place where there is nothing other than monkeys and men behaving like monkeys. When Kunta starts talking to Bell about Africa, his life before the kidnapping, and his education in his village Juffure; she started asking about the names of things and pointing out whatever she sees and demanding how they named it in his language (410-411). The ceremony of naming his first child, although the mother feels threatened, makes Kunta happy and he feels as if "Africa [pumped] in his veins—and flowing from him into the child..."(424).

The Transfer of Identity

The transfer of identity begins when the girl is born, and it continues with her growing up. This transfer becomes familiar in the family where old members of the family gather the young and retell for them the story of the ancestor. They become more related to their tradition they invent in order to protect the old ones and their history and identity. The story of Kunta and some words of the Mandinkan language, 'Ko' for a banjo and 'Kamby Bologo' for a river, are the main aspects to make the family happy and united.

Conclusion

Alex Haley wrote *Roots* as a kind of autobiography in order to retell the story of the family as a kind keeping their invented tradition to all African Americans who are considered as brothers and sisters who should know about how their ancestors came to America and what they suffered. *Roots* is a novel which tells the Story of an African named Kunta Kinte, and his trip to America and his ,and his family too, adventure in the New World with the white's oppression. The novel also expresses the soul of black identity which transfer and remained in the family. Their remembrance of their grandfather is one of the clearest options that Alex Haley expresses in his novel. Also, the novel celebrates an African and an American unity which is fully achieved and unsullied by two decades of war and it circumstances at home or abroad.

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