

Trauma of Slavery: A Critical Study of the Roots by Alex Haley

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Abstract

Roots by Alex Haley is a critical analysis of the traumas of slavery experienced by the Africans. As an Afro-American writer, he gives voice to the issues like racism, subjugation, identity crises of the Blacks, but most of all the institution of slavery. Slavery has been an important phenomenon throughout history. Africa has been intimately connected with this history through Americans. Slavery in America began when the African slaves were brought to the North American colony of Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619, to aid in the production of such lucrative crops like tobacco and cotton. After the research of twelve years, Haley describes the experiences of Kunta Kinte before and after his enslavement, who is the great-great-grandfather of the writer. Roots is not just a saga of one Afro-American family, it is the symbolic saga of a people. The dehumanization process of slavery assaults the mind, body, and soul of African slaves. The purpose of this paper is to highlight and investigate the slow momentum of social reform for Blacks in the U.S.A. This will be qualitative research and critical race analysis will be applied as a tool to analyze the text under discussion. By using the theory of Derrick Bell the researcher will try to explore racism and black identity in this work.

Keywords: NAACP, Signs, Psycho-Existential displacement, Drapatomania, Cultural trauma

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1. Introduction

This research focuses on the trauma of slavery and its deadly effects on the minds of Blacks in Roots: The next generation by Haley (1976). In this piece of literature, the writer has traced his family history back seven generations to Kunta Kinte of Gambia. Black people in America being black and poor have been victims of racism not only from the white but also from the people of their own race. The issue of race has pushed the Blacks towards a margin. Africa has been intimately connected with the history of slavery, both as a major source of slaves and as one of the principal areas where slavery was common.

Broadly speaking, slavery expanded in at least three stages from 1350 to 1600, 1600 to 1800 and 1800 to 1900 by which time slavery had become a fundamental feature of the African political economy. This expansion occurred on two levels that were linked to the external slave trade. First, slavery became more common over an increasingly greater geographical area, spreading outward from those places that participated directly in the external slave trade. Second, the role of slaves in the economy became more important, resulting in the transformation of the social, economic and political order. Again, external trade was associated with this transformation. In 1619, the Dutch introduced the first captured African to America, planting the seed of slavery system that evolved into exploitation and cruelty and would ultimately divide the nation. The objectives of this article are to highlight the traumatic conditions that Blacks have to suffer in Western society because they are blacks.

2. Literature Review

For several years, the contribution of fiction as a tool of the social and moral rebuild has always been debated by novelists and literary critics. The black writers in their literary works have tried to build up the images of the blacks in a positive way and inform the whites about the genuine characters of the blacks. The depiction of blacks in the works of white writers like Kipling, Conrad, and Shakespeare is replete with racial prejudice. The focus of current research is to accentuate slavery as atrocious for blacks at the time of its outset in 1619, till the existing oppression of African-Americans through the congenital patterns which are drawn by Haley (1976) in Roots; the saga of an African-American family.

Many African American writers have started to write slave tales. In literary terms, the initial attempts have not been appreciated and convenient just because of the law that forbids the literacy and schooling of slaves. The very few among them who have become able to learn a little amount of education do not have sufficient sources to defy white writers and attract white readers of their competence. The most common type of writing among African American writers is the autobiography. The African-American writers have used the autobiography not only to preserve the black identity but to encounter the whites' racism and intolerance as well. For instance, the whites have constructed a myth that black children do not show interest in education and observed to be sluggish. It has been suggested that if they want to come out of their poverty, they must pay attention to it and should take it as a commitment. But in reality, the schools that African American children have attended are completely

discriminative and underprivileged. Thus, the black writers have directly addressed the social and political issues which are related to the adversity of the black community.

Rand (1997) is a Russian-American novelist, playwright, and philosopher. She has been acknowledged by her best-selling novel, *Atlas Shrugged & the Fountainhead* (1997). She is of the opinion that racism is something, which has not recognized people according to their ancestors' heritage, either cultural or physical. The philosophy of racism asserts that the composition of a persons' brain is inbred. His physical strength is beyond the bounds and all his beliefs, self-reliance and character have decided before his birth. This kind of racism is based on the organic characteristics of a human being and has ignored individuals' specific capabilities, expertise, values, and opinions. This practice has developed a certain kind of privilege and sense of superiority in a particular race.

To be more simplified, western civilization is conceived as a cultural grid. The white man has given the right to disrespect other races and cultures. Centuries ago, the foundation of racial discrimination in America is based on slavery, where the people of color have treated as slaves to the whites. The issue of the eradication of slavery has turned into a severe clash between North and South America, which has finally led to the Civil War. After the war, the prejudice and fury of the whites have become more intense against blacks. The present century racial segregation in the United States refers to the enforced legal and social separation of races, chiefly between whites and blacks.

These African Americans are former slaves, who now have become free. On the other hand, many African-Americans have been influenced by Dubois's (1917), thinking. He is one of the most influential African-American activist, historian, sociologist, author, and Pan-Africanist. He has determined himself being a mulatto (a person of mixed white and black ancestry, especially a person with one white and one black parent).

Dubois (1917) and other intellectuals have established The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. The reason for the development of this association is to give rise to the voice of African-Americans at the national level. Dubois (1917) is the first who confronted Jim Crow Laws and notices the American racism when he has attended the Fisk University in Tennessee. He has pondered over the critical situation and wants to protest apartheid by means of political action. Jim Crow Law is a succession of racist orders against African-Americans after slavery has banished. These laws have been executed from 1876 to 1965, but the aftereffects of Jim Crow are still present in the United States.

3. Research Methodology

In order to dismantle the racial inequality in society, critical race theory is an approach that offers a magnifying glass through which to make sense of racism and Western ways of looking at other races. Critical race theory emerges as a theoretical framework specifically to those researchers and students, who are seeking and examining issues about race, racial identity and racism. It is established on the acceptance that racism is the production of power relations and social thought.

The activists and scholars who are interested in analyzing and transforming the relationship between races, power, and racism have worked in collaboration with the Critical race theory. Dissimilar to civil rights, the infrastructure of the liberal order, which includes legal reasoning, equality theory, enlightenment theory and constitutional laws have been investigated by critical race theory. It contains an activist dimension and first appears in the mid-1970s, with the early work of Bell (2000). He has served as a professor of law at New York University and is regarded as the movement's father figure. Due to the slow tread of racial reform in the United States, he feels severely upset.

Critical race theory is commenced with the belief that in American society, racism is normal and natural and not exceptional to people of color. It has become their everyday experience like the regular way society does business in common. Racism has been regarded by CRT as so deeply rooted in the social order of the western society so that it is viewed as natural to the blacks. The scholars of CRT argue that racism functions in a sociopolitical condition. To disclose and defy racial inequality; white supremacy in developing and fortifying racial subjugation and perpetuating a normalized white authority is the central concern of CRT. In the United States, racial discrimination is mainly referred to as the socially and legally imposed segregation of races, particularly between Whites and Blacks.

4. Text Analysis

In *Roots* Haley tackles the topic of slavery with incredible nuance; examines how slavery was traditionally practiced inside America. This textual analysis discusses various aspects of the novel that directly associated with the issue of slavery.

4.1 Trauma of Slavery through Sign

In the beginning chapters of the novel, the writer has used a lot of sensory images as well as nature imagery to describe the setting and rich culture of Africa. For instance, he depicts the sounds of the birds, the flowing

streams, the beautiful colors of the rainbow, the perfumes of the land and the different climate during the rainy and dry seasons. The oral tradition and storytelling technique is very effectively described in the novel. The oral tradition, respect for elders and sanctity of food are an integral part of Kunta's identity. It all stands in sharp contrast to the second half of the novel which is full of intense and gross description of oppression the slaves had to go through. Hall (2010) mentions in "Hall and Cultural Studies: Decoding Cultural Oppression", 'Saussure argued that language is a system of signs in which all terms are interrelated and achieve their value only from the simultaneous presence of all other terms. The most defining feature of a sign, then, 'is its opposition to other signs'. The sign of darkness has always been used as evil or fear in the history of literature written by Whites. But in this piece of literature, Haley (1976) uses the sign of darkness as parallel. The Blacks used to celebrate their black color, even the girl who is the blackest is considered more beautiful and privileged for marriage in the Gambia. The black color is highly symbolic. Similarly, the imagery of the river is particularly very powerful in the novel. The beating of the drum is described as highly symbolic in African culture. Therefore, all the signs and symbols that have been discussed in the earlier chapters bring forth the idea that slavery has its traumatic impacts which pass on generation to generation and left its indispensable footprints on the minds of the blacks.

4.2 Impact of physical torture as Psycho-Existential displacement among slaves in Roots

The intense whipping and physical torture lead to psycho-existential displacement among slaves. The term psycho-existential is coined by Fanon (1963). Psycho-existential is defined by the suffering due to the loss of basic constituents that form the identity of human beings: Loss of freedom, family relations and hold over future and self-esteem. The pain of existence has mostly used as an emblem for suffering. Even though all the slave characters in *Roots* have experienced psycho-existential displacement to a certain extent but it is strongly reflected in Kunta's character. He is portrayed as a free man who has lived a very satisfied and blessed life in the Gambia with his family. Afterwards, he has been captured by the toubobs (whites) with the assistance of the native African traitors and is taken to America to be sold to a white master named William Waller for only \$850. He is brutally beaten by his white master to accept his English name, Toby. But he insists to be called by his original name Kunta Kinte. In his repeated denial of accepting his new name, his master hanged him with a tree and whipped him until he accepts his new name and ultimately becomes unconscious. It shows the initial intensity of his psycho-existential suffering i.e. the ripping of his basic identity 'his native African name'.

4.3 Drapetomania

Due to the excessive beating of the White master, Kunta has tried to run away four times from the plantation in America. The prejudice of whites is reflected who name such escaping as Drapetomania, a disease that urges slaves to run away from plantations. Cartwright (2004), a distinguished American physician has observed, in 1851, that black slaves tried to run away are suffering from an illness. His paper is titled "Drapetomania, A Psychiatric Diagnosis: "Runaway Slave Syndrome". It explains that black slaves do not desire for independence, if they try to run away, it means that they are suffering from an illness. The reason he has mentioned is mainly the slave owners who deal with them almost as human beings, and as a result, they think of themselves as worthy beings. Their freedom is a disease and Cartwright has presented the antidote. In his view, slaves should be handled like children with attention and care to restrain them from running away. Such kindness keeps them in the state of obedience. If this treatment is not effective then whipping should be administered as a cure for escaping. At present Drapetomania is regarded as an instance of pseudoscience, and a reflection of scientific racism. He has depicted the illness as something which is not recognized in the field of medicine. However, the overseers and planters can relate to the symptoms i.e. the running away from the service. He exerts that they should be punished for their own interests. Despite the kindness, if the slaves show the mood, attitude and remain ungrateful to their masters without any reason, it is an alarm of forthcoming flee. In this situation, Cartwright has suggested "whipping the devil out of them" as a "preventive measure". The doctors also present the cure for the disease to make runaway an improbability by recommending the cutting of both big toes. The article written by Cartwright (2004) gains applaud in the South, while in the Northern United States it has been hugely ridiculed. In 1855, Buffalo Medical Journal Editorial has published a satire on his article. In *A Journey in the Seaboard* (1857), Fredrick Law Olmsted (American architect, journalist and social critic, 1822) has commented that even white approved servants used to run away as well, so he sarcastically assumes that the presumed illness has its European origins that have been brought to African slaves by white traders. The interpretation of Cartwright (2004) puts emphasis on the psychological issues of African Americans. In his definition of the disease and its eccentricity of the Negro race, he feels that blacks as human beings are incompetent to fulfill certain tasks. They are only fit to perform the ass-like duties and nothing else.

4.4 Psychological annihilation of slaves

The racial discourse is quite apparent from the words of William Waller (a slave owner) in chapter 70 when he says that the person who wants to become a successful owner of the slaves must remember at first hand that

these slaves have been lived with animals in African forests since a long time. They inherit the praxis of being filthy, apathetic and lumpish naturally. It is the obligation of Christians, to whom God has given superiority over Blacks, to teach them civility, courtesy, and respect towards work. The Whites should present themselves as role models and if necessary, then through law and punishment as well. A little politeness being displayed by Whites becomes the cause of disloyalty, cunningness, and deceitfulness in this abject creature. Having slaves requires a giant's patience and courage. It is a hard task to deal with in which nerves can be wrecked. The slaves are unable to accumulate wealth. They are not paid for their work. They cannot even dare to ask their masters about their legitimate rights. They are not able to utilize their talents to improve their circumstances by looking for better jobs that pay well. They have no control over their working situations because they are closely supervised. The masters have complete authority over their households, plantations, and farms, so appeals cannot go higher than the masters. Even the local governments in the South almost always hand over the cases back to the owners, who have police powers over the slaves and the land. The endurance of physical violence and the need to remain subservient in front of the master inculcate anger and deception in the slaves. Their children and spouses become scapegoats of their anger. Dunbar (1913), the black poet also asserts the need to hide emotions in one of his most famous works of the late nineteenth century. He has earned recognition on a national level for his work. His parents also have borne the sufferings of slavery. During the civil war, his father has served in the Union Army after fleeing from slavery. A general view is that his poetry is influenced by the experiences of his parents as slaves. Dunbar (1913) grows up by listening to the stories by his parents. The title of his poem is highly symbolic and realistic. The poem, "We Wear the Mask", focuses on the frustrations of suppressed black Americans who have been compelled to conceal their agony and suffering behind the camouflage of satisfaction and happiness.

- "We wear the mask that grins and lies. It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, this debt we pay to human guile; with torn and bleeding hearts we smile, and a mouth with myriad subtleties" (Dunbar, 1913, p. 32)

In this stanza of the poem, the mask represents the attempt of black people to conceal their true emotions behind a disguise. There are many instances in the novel of hiding the original feelings of slaves and pretend to be as if everything is all right. In many places, Kunta pretends to keep calm and does not reveal his fury against whites. The slave's appearance has been given much value by the Slave owners, in which at all times they have to pretend as submissive and cheerful. Most of all, slaves are not allowed to plan for themselves. They have no right to show any kind of annoyance naturally brimming from physical violence either being victimized or witnessing a victim. Slaves have been turned into stammers that always seem to be dismayed, looking down as servile beings although they have burning anguish deep in their hearts. When blacks are legally pronounced as free after the civil war, they are unable to display their frustration, anger, and pain in public. They have been afraid that in case they reveal their anguish in any form, it might lead to severe retaliation.

4.5 Formation of Afro-American identity by means of slavery

A new chapter begins in Kunta's (protagonist) life when he is captured by the whites and is taken to America that shapes his Afro-American identity. Afterwards, when he has landed, he is branded with 'LL' by hot iron and then his African name (Kunta Kinte) has been ripped-off by the whites and given a new name (Toby). All these things play an integral part in shaping his new identity. Haley (1976) enunciates his perspective toward racism in America. What struggles blacks have to do in the New World scene to keep their identity alive, both in pro or pre-war era. In his work *Roots*, the relationship between African American identity and African culture is clearly depicted and what conditions they have to go through in America for centuries. It deals with multiple issues like racism, identity crises, sense of alienation, civil war, and the forced implementation of laws before and after the war. Like many other Afro-American novels, *Roots* has focused on the alliance between the races, specifically blacks. But what makes it unique from others is that it illustrates all this through the saga of seven generations of an African American family in America. The family is none other than the author. Somehow in one way or the other, all the Black writers have one united purpose, and that is independence or freedom. They celebrate their unique cultural heritage and feel a strong urge to be free from the impacts of colonization and slavery. The act of committing suicide of blacks on plantations, on ships and even on their homeland has not been unusual. One such instance we find in Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Like Haley (1976), Achebe (1958) has also celebrated the rich culture of his tribe, 'the Igbo tribe'. He has successfully presented the Igbo culture and its beliefs, ceremonies, traditions, customs, festivals, rituals and system of justice with eccentricity. The protagonist of the novel, Okonkwo, is a self-made man of great worth and power and pride for his tribe. After the invasion of white colonizers, Okonkwo commits suicide because he is unable to accept the foreign culture and religion. His mind does not allow him to subjugate in front of these white missionaries who want to disciple native blacks to their religion.

4.6 Dehumanization of Blacks

At Kunta's second plantation, after the failure in his fourth attempt of fleeing, his White master tides him with a tree and cut the toes of his foot. Fiddler, another black slave servant, tells him that he has good luck for not being killed after his four attempts at escaping. According to the law, the white has the right to kill a slave who has been caught while fleeing. These laws have been declared after every six months in the churches of the whites. Before constructing any new county, the court is established first in order to impose further laws for the Negroes. In fact, the only thing that Virginia House of Burgess has to do is to introduce strange laws against niggers. For instance, it is also a law, that niggers cannot hold a gun or any kind of weapon not even a spade of wood. According to the law, if a nigger has been caught without a permission letter, he would be whipped twenty times. The punishment is extended if a black sees in the eyes of a white he would be whipped ten times and he would get twenty whippings at hitting a white Christian. It is in the law that one ear of a black liar must be cut if a white testifies against him. On lying twice, he has to be bereaved by both ears. No one is dared to listen to black's teachings, according to the decree. A black must be hanged for the killing of a white. There is also a charter against the education of blacks even to give them a book. Even a mandate has passed against the drum beating of niggers. Fiddler further adds by elucidating Kunta that as far as his foot is concerned, whites do not consider black's organs as feet or arms rather offshoots and boughs, which can be cut or broken anytime. He has witnessed many devastated niggers, who have been still working on the plantations. Their bodies have been excoriated and sprinkled by salt and turpentine oil and then viciously rubbed on the grass. If the niggers are arrested for planning any rebellion against the Government, they would be strictly punished. They are forced to walk upon blazing embers so that they fall down and ultimately die as a result. It is not a crime in the eyes of legislation if a black has died during this activity. In fact, it is an executed law in this country.

4.7 Inequitable Legislation after the Civil War (1861-1865)

Slavery by its very nature is abusive and abhorrent to the human spirit. After the Civil War, for a moment shortly after slavery ended, states rushed to enact laws to continue the subjugation of African Americans. Despite the heroic efforts of black and white abolitionists, whose names and sacrifices remain neither celebrated nor acknowledged, embittered white Southerners were still concerned about regaining control over blacks, while many Northerners were afraid blacks would overrun their communities. It is detestable that constitutions were written and laws were enacted to develop and maintain the institution of slavery. Slaves had not even the simplest of human rights. They were chattel, defined as a moveable item of personal property, and as chattel, slave owners were free to do with them as they pleased.

4.8 Slavery as Cultural trauma or Collective memory in Roots

The concluding chapters deal with Haley's research to trace his family origin and trip back to the Gambia and Juffere. He chooses to travel on a ship and tried to feel the same physical torture through which his great-great-grandfather went through under the deck. Therefore, slavery is not only traumatic for the slaves who experienced it directly but also for those who are descendants of those slaves as collective memory. It can never be imagined by the author that this experience of investigation would be so depressing and exhausting. There is debris of records and files regarding slave ships. He seems to be fixed between the triangle of England, America and Africa like a never-ending trial. As long as he proceeds to unlock the doors of his enigmatic endeavour, he becomes more frustrated. He becomes enraged to learn that how slave trading has become an industry at that time just like cattle trade today. His mind has envisioned how millions of his ancestors have been kidnapped and enslaved individually as well as collectively by the whites. At night, people have wakened up yelling and witnessing the flames of fire that have captured the village from all around. The people who have been captured are joined neck-by-neck with massive ropes into a sequence called 'coffles', which is as long as a mile in length. Many of them have died on the way due to acute cold, hunger and bleeding wounds. Those who could not move further because of feebleness, have left alone to die. The survivors have taken to the ocean and branded with scorching irons. They have been whipped and dashed mercilessly to the longboats. The prisoners have shouted and sobbed with pain. They have tried to embed their nails into the swampy area and filled their mouths with the soil. It is the clay of their holy motherland Africa, to which they would never return again. They have been beaten and pushed down to the stinking cellar of the ship. They are shackled and over-loaded that they cannot even turn aside. The next moment, Haley has deeply sighed and started crying like an infant. His wailing and sobbing are for the inhuman barbarity and torture to which his people have gone through. It is indeed a hideous stigma of human history. At this point, he has suffered severe psychological trauma, which is the result of slavery. The difference of trauma is highlighted by its effects on individuals as well as on a cultural group. As a cultural process, it has shaped the collective identity and collective memory. Slavery is traumatic for those, who have directly experienced it like Kunta. But those who have not to experience it at first hand; it is somehow still present in their memory or psyche. For instance, an African American adult who has witnessed his slave parents being beaten or tortured by the master in his childhood cannot remove this from his psyche.

4.9 The role of Western media in projecting racial discourse against Blacks

The Western media is another central agency of racial discourse for conveying the negative images of blacks to the masses. According to Hall (2010), Blacks are still marginalized to a large extent as they are represented on screens as rebel fighters, drug dealers and slaves because this is what white spectator desires and demands to see. A powerful role has been played by the media in forming a public understanding of individuals and distinct groups. They have been directed by their stakeholders to what is admissible and inadmissible to their customers. The depiction and displaying of the black images are primarily in the control of whites dominated media. The images of African-Americans have been cauterized into the cerebral frying pan of whites by Western media. Eventually, these negative images have been digested and go unconsciously down to the social interior of America. It has been a cautiously planned hegemonic design of Western mass media which presents an incomplete and often deliberately false view of the blacks. This deceitfulness incites and agitates minorities which leads to controversy and in addition further subdivides America into factions.

5. Conclusion

The present work will emphatically advance the race studies in order to promote the rational approach among scholars and critics. The researchers will be urged to direct their research on the issue of racism and the hegemony of Whites over marginalized and oppressed Blacks in Western society. It will help the researchers to expose and highlight the prejudice and discrimination of Whites in a better way in the future. Slavery led to the debilitation of many slaves, whether in the form of scars or mental illness. A line of anxiety and pain caused by scares was not an ideal life in the least. By the end of the eighteenth century, branding, amputation and other extremely brutal forms of punishment transformed as a means of controlling slaves. The novel *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. At the heart of the *Roots* lies a battle for individual autonomy, against slave owners, and then against an American intent on marginalizing black people.

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