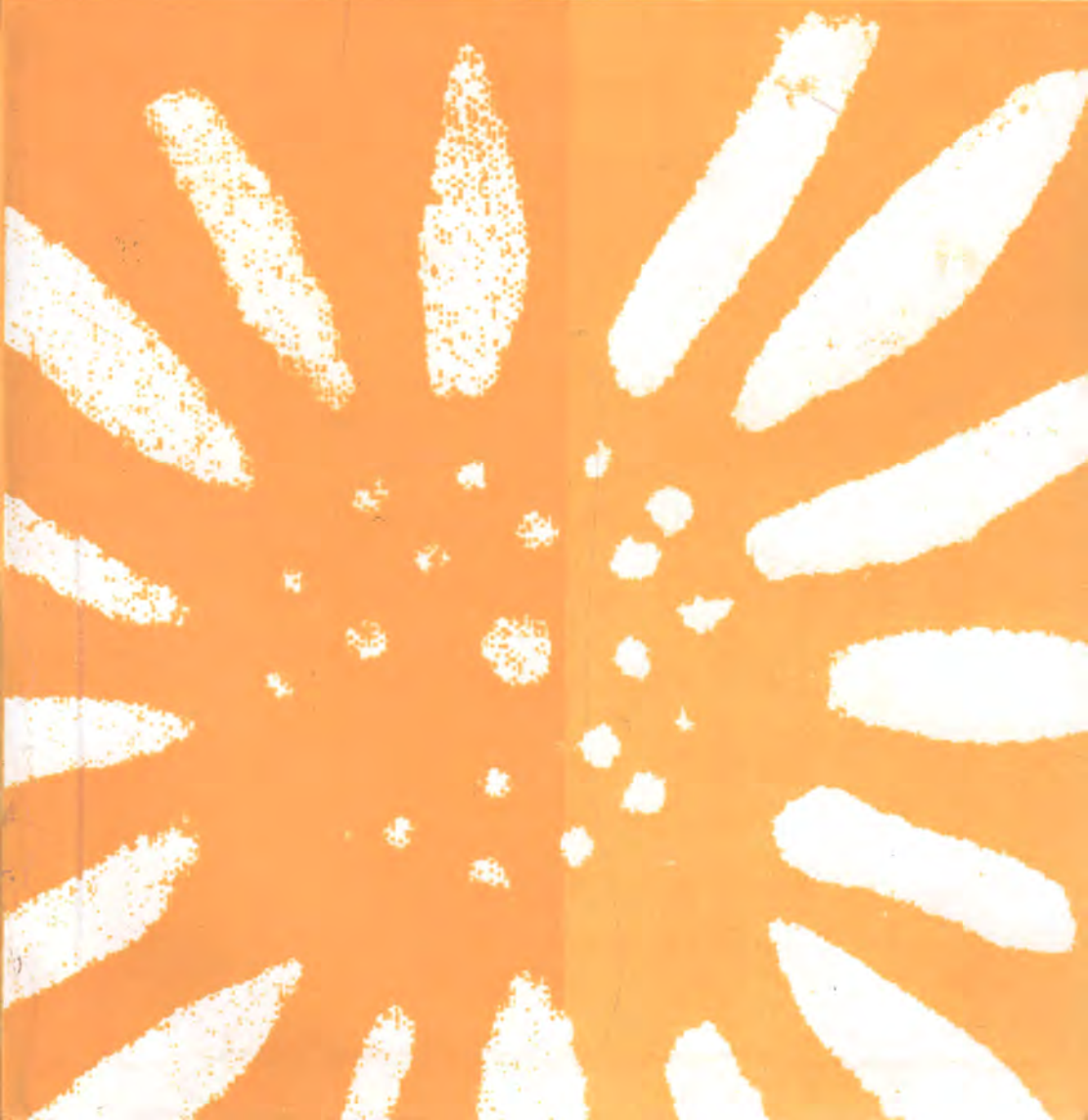


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AFROCENTRICISM AND RESISTANCE IN ROOTS: A SYNERGY OF COUNTER- HEGEMONIC THRUST

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Abstract

Roots, by Alex Haley, one of the most famous African American slave narratives, has, over time, been critiqued more as a historical text than a literary and creative extension of the African American people. In addition, the tenet of Afrocentricism in the novel has been grossly misrepresented. This research examines the inherent exegesis of Afrocentricism vis-a-vis the notion of Resistance, which constitutes a core thematic preoccupation in the novel and which expurgates the nuances of extremist Afrocentricism. Premised on two sub-tenets of postcolonialism, Afrocentricism and Resistance, this study addresses the complexity of identity construction in the novel. It demonstrates that Afrocentricism and Resistance foreground the sure-fire import of *Roots* among other collective bodies of African American literature that aptly respond to the theme of slavery, its aftermaths, and identity reconstruction. It reaffirms the position of *Roots* as a canonical literary text which also explicitly projects the tune of liberal Afrocentrism as a crucial step towards identity reconstruction among Africans and people from African descent; the debate of liberal Afrocentricism as a viable roadmap to self-discovery among people of African descent; and a physical and psychological rebirth that accentuates the success tale of

African American people. It contends that the total emancipation of the African and African American societies lies mainly in the consistent search for both individual and collective identity through a continuous introspect into their past. It concludes that liberal Afrocentricism remains the rational roadmap to understanding *Roots*, against the backdrop of critics that have misrepresented as well as undermined the legendary import of the novel as a classic African American literary canon.

Key words: Afrocentrism, Resistance, Counter-Hegemony, Identity reconstruction, rebirth.

Introduction

The novel *Roots* has been categorised as a unique form of black American literature, more particularly as a result of its socio-historical and psycho-therapeutic relevance. While many critics, especially people from African American descent, have celebrated *Roots* as a psychological re-union of the black African world and a redefinition of a hitherto lost identity, other critics have censured the novel as a sheer historical documentation, which is central to the origin of the black race in the New Continent. But it has also been argued that the novel, like any other prose narrative, carries the unavoidable hermeneutics of fiction, which, quite a number of critics have insisted, is perhaps inaccurate and too weak to interpret a historical discourse of physical and psychological viciousness of African American slave experience, while emphasising that the novel also appears to hinge its narrative only on the much touted theme of slavery.

For instance, Jack Kerwick (2012), in his article, entitled "Alex Haley's Fraudulent *Roots*", vehemently opposes the canonisation of *Roots* as a significant genre of African American literature, saying "to describe *Roots* merely as 'fiction' is to treat Haley with more charity than he deserves". In spite of all this argument and other similar ones, *Roots* offers much more on the historical recount of the African American slave experience. More importantly, its relevance is further buttressed in the universal motifs of identity, resilience and counter-hegemony which suffuse the narrative. Thus, there is an attempt to redefine the description of the novel simply as a mere fiction or even a historical account, which appears derivative, or in fact, inconclusive, just as Joseph Conrad's myopic view of the African world.

The choice of this novel as a relevant 'tool' in analysing the experience of the African American people would be more appropriate, given two cogent factors. First, whichever angle critics may choose to hinge their appraisal of *Roots* on, one of the two thematic pre-occupations which are central to the discourse of interpreting the novel as a counter-hegemonic text is Afrocentrism, as effectively emphasised in the childhood days of the central character of the novel, Kunta Kinte, in his African village, Juffure. The term 'Afrocentrism' has always been problematic. This ranges from its definition, history, theoretical approach, to its relevance as a discourse to humanity in general, especially people of African descent and this ideology has continually attracted diverse criticisms. According to Wilson J. Moses (1998):

I have not discovered who was the first person to employ the expression "Afrocentrism," but it was not Professor Molefi Asante, although the term has been closely associated with him for almost two decades. . . the actual term "Afrocentrism" was employed by W.E.B. DuBois, possibly as early as 1961, and definitely by 1962.

Moreover, there is the significant irony that much of what is now termed Afrocentrism was developed during the 1930s by the Jewish American scholar, Melville Herskovits. It is equally impossible to deny Herskovits's influence on such universally regarded scholars as August Meier, Roger Abraham, Sterling Stuckey, Robert Ferris Thompson and so on. In a nutshell, different interpretations have been given to Afrocentrism, which have made the discourse abstract and quite intricate. Perhaps Achebe's famous saying in *Things Fall Apart*, that "if one wants to enjoy a masquerade festival, one cannot be rooted to a single spot" would be the appropriate metaphor in the quest of unfolding different layers and interpretations of Afrocentric discourse vis-a-vis the novel, *Roots*, itself.

It is a fact that Dr Asante's appropriation of the term 'Afrocentrism' started in 1980 with the publication of his work *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*. The essay particularly centres on the historical analysis of African American political theory, and offers some insights on how African American students and scholars may avoid incorporating Eurocentric biases into their own

work. In exploring the Afrocentric concept, Asante has amended his definition several times. But to avoid unnecessary deviation from this work, rather than exploring diverse definitions, the term 'Afrocentrism' would be discussed from two major perspectives, which, for the purpose of this work, are considered as the landmark classification. In other words, Afrocentricism can be classified into two distinct groups namely the Extremist and the Liberal.

Afrocentrism, in simple terms, ideologically regards African or black culture as pre-eminent, a re-establishment of Africa and its descendants as centres of value, with no attempt at debasing other people and their historical contributions to world civilisation. This definition appears to take the liberal position. In some ways, Afrocentrism is arguably a reaction to the deep injustices of racism and the subjugation of African American people for much of its history, particularly under the notorious *Jim Crow Law* which effectively operated as a racial caste system in the Southern and border states of North America from the 1870s until the mid 1960s. As such, Afrocentrism, as a counter discourse, becomes inevitable, an antithesis geared towards a reassertion of a battered identity and a redemption from the horrors of physical and psychological delineation.

To Robert T. Carroll, author of "The Skeptic's Dictionary", Afrocentrism is "a pseudo-historical movement that erroneously claims that African-Americans should trace their roots back to ancient Egypt because it was dominated by a race of black Africans." Moreover, at its most extreme, many scholars have argued that Afrocentrism is essentially racist; and its thinking flawed. Cain Hope Felder (1998) states that, "Afrocentrism is the idea that Africa and persons of African descent must be seen as proactive subjects within history, rather than passive objects of Western history." He explicitly describes the extent to which the concept has evolved:

Nevertheless, there are certain pitfalls into which a number of excessive or sensationalist proponents of Afrocentrism have fallen such as (a) demonising categorically all white people, without careful differentiation between persons of goodwill who are allies or potential allies and those white adversaries who consciously and systematically perpetuate racism. (b) replacing Eurocentrism with an equally

hierarchical, gender-insensitive, and racially exclusive “centrism” based on a new fantastic mythology in which one group of people or another claims to be, by virtue of race or ethnicity. An example is the notion of Africans as “sun people” and Europeans as “ice people” (Welsing, Jefferies, and other melanin theoreticians). (c) adopting multiculturalism as a curricular alternative that eliminates, marginalises, or vilifies European heritage to the point that Europe epitomises all the evil in the world (d) Not differentiating between the different types of multiculturalism and Afrocentrism that exist.

Among the strong proponents of the extreme Afrocentric discourse is George G.M. James (1954), who suggests that the notion of black cultural legacy was deliberately taken, as emphasised in his book, *Stolen Legacy*. This, no doubt, has a lasting influence in Afrocentrist circles. James's central message is that Greek achievements are based on a deliberate and systematic plundering of Black Egyptian ideas, while asserting that his book offers a *New Philosophy of Redemption for Black Peoples*. James's message is directed to black people to stop citing Greek philosophers and to resign from sororities, fraternities and other institutions that honour Ancient Greece.

On the contrary, Mary Lefkowitz, a professor of Classics at Wellesley College and author of *Not out of Africa. How Afrocentrism became an excuse to teach myth as History*, provides several in-depth critiques into how James's methodology and factual assertions are deeply flawed. She argues that a culture cannot be stolen, saying the Romans adopted Greek culture, which they thought was better than their culture. But, meanwhile, the Greeks still had their culture. According to Lefkowitz (2001):

The modern movement in academia (Extreme Afrocentrists) takes up from these old ideas and develops them further but in a couple of directions. One is that a conspiracy theory has been added: The truth has been kept from people of African descent by whites and Europeans who were jealous of it,

essentially, and wanted the history of civilisation to be theirs and theirs alone. And this fits in very nicely with the kind of paranoid politics that are so popular in this country.

Grover Furr (1991) also insists that "Afrocentrism is a racist, highly conservative, nationalist pseudo-science (by the latter term, I mean based upon phony scholarship and premises). It victimises black students almost exclusively, since it is they who have this nonsense foisted off upon them as truth." To him, "Afrocentrism is another form of authoritarianism. It tells black students: Believe "your leaders" *because* they are black!

For the Afrocentric discourse to be condemned solely on the extremist argument of some scholars would, in itself, either reflect an unpardonable ignorance or absolute denial of the significance of the African socio-historical identity and literary cosmos on which the theme of Afrocentrism is premised. Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992) focuses on how much of the body of African academia is ignored by extreme Afrocentrists who tend to focus very much on Egypt and its effect on Greek civilisation. Appiah observed that, with the exception of Cheik Anta Diop, most scholarly works on Afrocentrism tend to be completely ignored. However, Diop is not without his own agenda: "Ancient Egypt was a Negro civilisation (and) the moral fruit of their civilisation is to be counted among the assets of the Black World."

Appiah strongly advocates that the proper response to Eurocentrism is surely not a reactive Afrocentrism, but a new understanding that humanises us all by learning to think beyond race. By extension, he advocates a respectable degree of liberal Afrocentric discourse, which foregrounds the recognition and celebration of African cultures and value system, hitherto displaced, based on the almost irredeemable havoc of *denial*. This, exactly, is what Alex Haley has not only come to terms with but also rightly emphasises in the early chapters of his novel. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to further reconstruct extremist, exegesis of Afrocentric critics such as Jack Kerwick, among others, by foregrounding Alex Haley's *Roots* as a canonical text that celebrates, re-defines and appropriates Afrocentricism from a liberal, objective perspective. Wilson J. Moses (1998) corroborates this ideology with a non racial view of the concept

of Afrocentrism, while indirectly de-emphasising the self-conceited, radical interpretation of the discourse. In addition, and most importantly, he also joins the slow-paced movement that believes that Afrocentrism is actually a universal concept, which is gradually becoming 'centralised'. He avers:

My purpose is to show that Afrocentrism is not a self-contained tradition, recently developed by black zealots. The phenomenon represents an attempt by black and white authors to manipulate history and myth, poetry and art, folklore and religious tradition, regardless of authorship, in ways sympathetic to African peoples. Despite the fulminations of ethno-chauvinists and other prejudiced persons, it remains a fact that the contributions of white scholars, like Boas, Malinowski, and Herskovits, were fundamental to that complex of ideas that we designate today as Afrocentrism.

Given this above discussion on the different definitions of Afrocentricism which can all be categorized into two classifications of Extreme and Liberal Afrocentricism, the position of this research foregrounds Afrocentricism as transcending racism, black zealousness and mere victimisation of blacks. More important, Haley's *Roots*, which have been unduly undermined, practically underscores the re-definition of Afrocentricism, while authorising its literary, not merely historical, relevance to the total concept of African American literature.

Reconstructing *Roots* as liberal Afrocentric canon

In his widely read work on African American music, *Blues People* (published under his old name LeRoi Jones), Amiri Baraka, an African American scholar, footnotes and promulgates the Herskovits' claim that the African past was of fundamental importance to the present and future status of African Americans. Following this trail of thought, it is somewhat impossible not to revert to the pre-colonial African experience, as buttressed in the opening chapters of *Roots*. This time around, the focus is not essentially geared towards reiterating the *old songs* of African absolute deification, but to foreground the ever constant contemporary search for identity, the essential foundation on

which Afrocentrism, as a total discourse, is built. The introduction of the birth of Kunta Kinte and, more importantly, his naming ceremony, spells out the significant metaphor of identity, personal and communal emotive and psychological, which is peculiar to people of African descent. This is carefully illustrated in the excerpts below:

Omoro then walked out before all of the assembled people of the village. Moving to his wife's side, he lifted up the infant and, as all watched, whispered three times into his son's ear the name he had chosen for him. It was the first time the name had ever been spoken as this child's name, for Omoro's people felt that each human being should be the first to know who he was.(2)

As reflected in several scholarly works, the significance of identity in African climes thrives beyond the threshold of sheer nomenclature as a means for public recognition or distinctiveness. Haley must have recognised the complex, symbolically distinct relationship between African people and their world, which functions as a combustion of physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual activities. Identity for Africans projects a state of self consciousness in the individual which metamorphoses into self assertiveness and confidence, a key towards personal growth, development and, especially in the context of this novel, survival. Like the incontestable function of an umbilical cord, identity strings Africans, as individuals or a community to their motherland, Africa, as captured below:

Out under the moon and the stars, alone with his son that eighth night, Omoro completed the naming ritual. Carrying little Kunta in his strong arms, he walked to the edge of the village, lifted his baby up with his face to the heavens, and said softly, "*Fend liling dorong leh warrata ka iteh tec.*" (behold - the only thing greater than yourself.) (3)

Therefore, Haley further foregrounds the appropriate image of Africa, as distinctly questioned by scholars for several decades, perhaps in a less confrontational manner (unlike the theme of anger exhibited by

some Negritude writers, like David Diop, among others). But basically, the manner in which the message about Africa is conveyed is less relevant, when compared with the hitherto 'message' of what Africa is not. A quintessential canonised text, which has constantly been criticised by Afrocentric scholars like Chinua Achebe for spreading prejudiced socio-cultural and psychological identity of Africa, is the novel, *Heart of Darkness*, by Joseph Conrad. This piece of literature, over time, has been regarded as an unquestionable Eurocentric hegemony. The text speaks:

But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us - who would tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a mad house (105)

Achebe's reaction postulates a message of counter-discourse, as emphasised in his essay, "An Image of Africa," saying the novel "projects the image of the black continent as "the other world", an antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilisation, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality." He explicitly criticises Conrad's subjective assertions and de-emphasises the Eurocentric motif through several contradictions consciously or unconsciously ignored by the Conrad's school of thought. Achebe rightfully posits:

Of course, there is a preposterous and perverse kind of arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the breakup of one petty European mind. But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanisation of Africa and Africans which age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the

world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanisation, which depersonalises a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot. I would not call that man an artist, for example, who composes an eloquent instigation to one people to fall upon and destroy them. (10)

Conrad, in an undignified manner, portrays Africans "in a mass," - condescending 'creatures', who are lucky to have met with *civilisation*. Haley, perhaps unconsciously, asserts the individual identity of Africans, whose significance would only thrive and become applicable in a communal setting (be it Juffure or elsewhere). But indeed, for Afrocentric scholars, whether extreme or liberal, Achebe's literary onslaught challenges that Eurocentric stance/philosophy and weakens it. Haley simply completes that counter-hegemonic cycle by firmly entrenching the functionality of identity of the African race as an individual and/or part of a community. He further reveals different strata of identity, all woven into a maze-like societal structure - a complacent network of roles and/or functions that create the societal equilibrium, order and stability. Kunta and his playmates, though young, understand the import of functionality as part of their identity. Little wonder they take seriously their prescribed job as lookouts for strangers while the adults concentrate on the socio-political and economic needs of the community.

This functionality provides two important results towards the psychological regeneration of every African. First, it constantly re-shapes and moulds the individual to fit into or conform to the society to which he or she belongs. Secondly, it births the psycho-dynamics of self-recognition or self-confidence, which has been passed from one generation to another and has sustained the African society from time immemorial. A good instance is when Kunta Kinte finally becomes a man after excelling in his manhood training. It is this inner consciousness which later sustains the central character of the novel and makes him, centuries after his death, historically relevant up till date. It was this inner consciousness that made him proud, even in the midst of intense physical and psychological pressure, never to forget his name (heritage), never to forget the land of his (re)-birth. And it is this inner

consciousness that best describes a more dignified interpretation of Afrocentrism.

Another excerpt from the novel, which lends credence to this argument, is when Kunta, alongside his 4th *kaffo* mates, comes back from the manhood training camp with an air of rebirth. This self-assured independence was spurred by the new function they were immediately saddled with in the community. Their duty as “the eyes and ears of the village” is taken with intense diligence and importance. The perspective here is that Afrocentricism must be functional and progressive. Without this, the whole identity crisis may not be solved and for extremists, their egocentric ranting would perhaps become absolutely unnecessary – a loud cry over spilt milk. As much as this argument does not maintain absolute silence over the four hundred years of slavery and colonisation, which, unfortunately, still forms the his(story) of the African American race, reverting to racism or victimisation would only prove detrimental to the omnipresent question of identity and re-birth, as African Americans. According to Haley, the theme of African enslavement (body and spirit) was perhaps anticipated and addressed, right from the inception of slave trade and definitely before the twentieth century search for black identity.

But he had no place else to go, so Kunta seat himself among those in the outer circle-beyond those of Omoro's (his father) age, who sat closer to the fire, and those of the Kunta ngo's age, who sat closest, among the Council of Elders. As he did so, he heard one of them ask: “Can anyone say how many of us are getting stolen?” (102)

This, again, could be mistaken for a cue for another extremist rebellion, which Haley is far from provoking. The author seems to suggest two crucial points. First, in Omoro's own words: “All men make mistakes. (71)” And second, that Afrocentric discourse should not be unreasonably confrontational and restricted. It is a dynamic discourse, a universal motif of a continuous search for the ‘right’ identity. After all, Africans too have a hand in the twist of their socio-historic fate, though apparently they did not shackle, sail and freely submit themselves into the perilous journey to the New America. One then wonders if Jack Kerwick, who claimed to have read *Roots* twice, could not understand

Haley's deviation from extreme Afrocentrism. Moreover, it is appalling that Kerwick, who seemed to find his desecrating voice in Thomas Sowell, who he arrogantly describes as a *black* thinker, would strongly suggest that Haley appropriates slavery as a phenomenon peculiar to the whites. His suffocating but clear prejudice seems to have prevented him from reading this vital excerpt;

The men stared at the fire for a long time, and then another elder broke the silence. "Toubob could never do this without help from our own people. Mandinkas, Fulas, Wolofs, Jolas - none of The Gambia's tribes is without its... traitors. (102)

Haley posits that for African Americans and especially Africans to find justification for slavery, they must first purge themselves of the identity of betrayal, greed, neo-colonialism, genocide and all other forms of vices which seem to delineate the African race and rip it from its central identity of communalism. In one of his writings, entitled "What *Roots* Means to Me", Haley aptly describes the functionality of *Roots* as an Afrocentric text.

About 90 per cent of my mail is from whites, and I have yet to receive my first hate letter. The pattern is for the whites to tell me that (1) they are white; (2) *Roots* caused them to realise they had never understood the black condition; (3) the book started them thinking about their own family. It has been a joy to see this positive identification by whites with what *Roots* is saying. None of this would have occurred if, for white people, *Roots* were a negative reminder of what had been. Instead, it is a positive avenue into a new perception of others, an understanding of a proud people, and the sensitive culture in which they lived. (160)

The second thematic thrust remains the effervescent theme of resistance as characterised in the 'Middle Passage' (sea voyage to the New World) as well as Kunta's lifetime slave experience on a foreign soil. This, no doubt, forms the enabling background on which the counter-hegemonic thrust of African American people is portrayed, as precisely captured in

Haley's literary masterpiece, beginning from the moments of capture, throughout the horrors of physical and psychological 'exodus' and up to the climax of incarceration and colonisation. But first, the survival of African slaves may thus be dismissed with a wave of hand, if references are not made to certain momentous experiences which buttress the quintessential significance of the theme.

The point is that as much as a resort to the socio-historical and psychological torture may suggest a deviation to the theme of slavery, an analysis of the resistance argument would never be fully and vividly explored. The agonising torture of the African slaves, as described in *Roots*, no doubt, evokes emotional disturbance. Nevertheless, in the face of every affliction, pounding and torment, there lies that resolve, a strong sense of willpower not to physically, and psychologically succumb to that overwhelming strain of hardship. This is what is celebrated; this foregrounds the very pride of every African American.

Kunta could see the lights raised high. With violent cursing, two of the *toubob* sent their whips whistling down against flesh. Whoever was being beaten refused at first to scream; though just listening to the force of the blows was almost paralysing to Kunta, he could hear the beaten man flailing against the chains in the agony of his torture-and of grim determination not to cry out. (134)

The history of the African Americans is not just a mere history of slave trade, as many have erroneously concluded. The experience of Africans on the sea route, the Middle Passage, is part of that history. Africans, even before they got to the New Continent, are made to pass through perhaps the greatest physical and psychological torture ever recorded in the history of the slave trade. It is, indeed, a his(story) of survival and it *must* be repeatedly told.

Next to the anguish and persecution comes the inevitable theme of death, which, for many slaves, is a better choice, compared to the physical torture and most excruciating, fear of the unknown which further chokes the compressed atmosphere of the underground lockers of the ships where nearly suffocating slaves are kept. In this manner, millions of African slaves died from various factors like the spread of diseases as a result of the dehumanising condition they were subjected

to, malnutrition, and starvation. But one emotive means is through suicide.

Then suddenly, amid rising shouts among the toubob, one of the girls who have been brought with Kunta was springing wildly between frantic guards. As several of them went clutching and diving for her, she hurled herself screaming over the rail and went plunging downward... Then the toubob up among the cloths were yelling and pointing towards the water. Turning in that direction, the naked people saw the girl bobbing in the waves - and not far away, a pair of dark fins coursing swiftly towards her. Then came another scream - a blood-chilling one - then a frothing and thrashing and she was dragged from sight, leaving behind only a redness in the water where she had been. (140)

The themes of death and survival do not usually run simultancously, as a discourse. There precisely lies the personal assertiveness of every African American child who must never limit his or her history to that of shame, regret and disillusion. It is rather a history of hope, determination, resilience and intractability. This argument, however, does not portray those who have perished on the way to the New Continent as weaklings. No! Never! In fact, their death(s), we must admit, verily send(s) shivers down our (the readers) spines, and much worse is the emotional torture of those African kindred who witnessed these ugly, unnatural scenarios. However, the irony here lies in the perceptively calm response which those alive later embraced. First, psychologically, they identified with their dead kindred. And this is not unusual. In fact, death, in African cosmology, simply means an elevation, as exemplified in Omoro's consoling words to Kunta Kinte, when Grandma Yaisa died. He states:

...Three groups of people lived in every village. First were those you could see-walking around, eating, sleeping, and working. Second were the ancestors, whom Grandma Yaisa had now joined. "And the third people-who are they?" asked Kunta. "The third

people," said Omoro, "are those waiting to be born."
(16)

Invariably, the motivation to survive, birthed from the strength of those Africans who had died, becomes the result of the strong, vast, successful race referred to today as African Americans. Later on in the novel, Kunta would come to realise that with his survival, especially on the ship, comes hope and through hope, comes a certain degree of liberation, essentially, neither from the physical assault of the whip nor the essential deprived freedom, but that his African identity would perhaps not be lost forever.

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. (225)

Well, he did, and this success story would, perhaps, not have made the light of the day, if the impending theme of disillusionment had not been replaced by the most dignified attitude of resilience. But a seeming rhetorical question, pivotal to the whole discourse of African American slave experience is, amid the horrendous physical assault and psychological dejection, how did they (African Americans) survive? Without any attempt at disregarding other historical accounts, it is believed that *Roots* does have a convincing angle to the question.

The ideology of resistance, from the perspective of African slavery, cannot be based on individualism. To survive their ordeal, these people later discovered that they really need one another's opinion, knowledge and past experience, before and after their incarceration. Kunta's interaction with his Wolof neighbour on the boat provides him, irrespective of the great constraint, with a sense of optimism and belonging. Right there in the mist of the unbearable stench and piteous moans of the slaves from consistent heaving and lashing, with rats gnawing away at their flesh wounds and the incredibly uncomfortable position on the boat, oblivious of their destination and equally their fate, the search for identity is born.

Kunta realised from the low murmuring that spread gradually throughout the hold that once the men had actually been able to see each other up in the daylight, he and his own shacklemate weren't the only ones trying now to communicate. And there was a new quality to the quietness that would fall at these times; for the first time since they had been captured and thrown in chains, it was as if there was among the men a sense of being together. (141)

The point is that the strength of people of African descent, especially Africans or African Americans lies in the principle of communalism, which is already inherent. According to Haley (1991), "we have been like people who live in the same house and tend to stay in our own rooms, doing no more than peeling out and then ducking back. If only we could all come out together... and learn more about each other, we couldn't help but benefit." It is therefore pertinent for Haley to emphasise the collective responsibility of the American people, adding that "it would show us our future as a collective people - retaining, being proud of, our differences, but coming together in collective strength."

Therefore, the definition of Afrocentrism would be incomplete, perhaps meaningless, if there is no deep sense of collectivism, especially among African people. As regards this issue, both Africans and African American people have something in common, that no matter the overbearing influence of Western civilisation, they need to constantly remind themselves of their collective identity. Haley believes that this quest for identity is outsourced from the dogmatic will of their ancestors, about four hundred years ago, in order to survive the hegemony of the Western world, both in Africa and in America. Hence, a more encompassing definition of Afrocentricism should rather embrace three salient concepts of "order and stability", "individual and societal equilibrium" and "functionality", all encompassed in the assertion of a more definitive identity, which is neither skewed nor enforced.

Speaking of hegemony, it is interesting to note, and also a pride to all people from African descent, that the struggle for emancipation has always been continuous and consistent. Kunta Kinte represents a

fraction of African slave leaders, who continue, one way or the other, without relenting, to free themselves and their people from the shackles of slavery and psychological relapse. It is true Kunta Kinte himself is captured several times, while trying to escape, such that eventually, his right foot is cut off, including Noah's (another slave) gullible escape plan. He, too, is eventually captured and severely punished, not to mention, decades later, several insurrections and violent outbreaks, all in a bid to escape the horrendous experience of slavery. Many of these too, if not all, were not, in the long run, successful.

However, the victory of these attempts lies in the fear of the unknown, fear of the inner will to survive, fear of physical and intellectual attributes of the black man. This fear is not physically shown, but silently hunts the masses (slave masters). According to Fiddler, a co-slave on the same plantation with Kunta, while answering Kunta's question about "pattyrollers" (patrols looking out for runaway slaves).

Dey's low-down po' white trash dat ain't never owned a nigger in dey lives! It's a ol' Virginia law to patrol de roads, or anywhere else niggers is, an' whip an' jail any of 'em gits cotched widdout a writ-out pass from dey massa. An' who gits hired to do it is dem po' whites what jes' loves cotchin' an' beatin' somebody else's niggers' 'cause dey ain't got none. What's behind it, y'understan', all white folks scared to death dat any loose nigger is plannin' a re-volt." (sic) (229)

This fear and/or uneasiness is carefully concealed by the white man, only reflected in the stringent laws and heinous methodologies of the land(s) designed to keep slaves in check. It also reflects in the way and manner the slave masters also lash out at their slaves as a result of the slightest infringement. This perhaps could be termed a psychological hegemony of the black slaves, one of the first victories over the theme of slavery and torture.

Perhaps the most devastating and destabilising period in the life of Kunta and his supportive wife, Bell, was when their only child, Kizzy, was sold as a result of being an accomplice to Noah's escape, out of her affection for him. The conversation between Bell and Master Waller, at the metaphorical level of representation, does not reflect slave

traders/owners as masters who is in charge, but as people who are afraid of losing control.

Massa Waller spoke glacially. "The law is the law. She's broken my rules. She's committed a felony. She may have aided in a murder. I 'm told one of those white men may die."

"Aint her cut de man, massa. Massa, she worked for you ever since she big 'nough to carry your slopjar! An' I done cooked an' waited on you han' an' foot over forty years, an' he..." gesturing at Kunta, she stuttered, "he done drive you eve'ywhere you been for near 'bout that long. Mass, don't all dat count for sump'n?"

Massa Waller would not look directly at her. "You were doing your jobs. She's going to be sold."(359)

The argument here is, perhaps, Massa Waller could have instituted another severe punishment instead of selling Kizzy. If at all he never wanted another run away, he would have sold the whole family off, as requested by Bell. But he didn't. And why? He was afraid of Kizzy's ability, potentials. He was afraid of her youth, vigour, intelligence and evolving autonomy.

Just as relevant as Kinte's personal choice of spending his life, defending and upholding the African customs and traditions, Kizzy's ability to read and write and most important, her 'little' attempt at securing a 'safe passage' into freedom for another African fellow showcases another round of hegemony - African's mastering of the white man's alphabetic writing. Alluding to several scholars in the category of Conrad who have hinted that people of African descent are backward because they cannot read and write, Kizzy's literary effrontery is a signifier, a pretext to the "generations (of African descent) waiting to be born" - the like of Lucy Terry, Phyllis Wheatley, Jupiter Hammon, down to W.E.B Du Bois, Sir Henry Louis Gates (Jnr), Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Alice Walker, Langston Hughes, Toni Morrison and many more. To say hers is a true success story, from this perspective, is to say the least.

For Kunta Kinte personally, it may not be a song of victory, but that of despair and defeat. As an individual, he most likely would see himself as a failure, unable to protect his only 'heritage'. For him, Kizzy represents the umbilical cord that joins him to Africa, his only reason to be alive in the strange world where he, despite spending most of life there, still refuses to envision as his new dwelling.

Suddenly he knew the truth: His Kizzy was gone; she would not return. He would never see Kizzy again. His face contorting, Kunta flung his dust toward the cabin's roof. Tears bursting from his eyes, snatching his heavy (precious) gourd up high over his head, his mouth wide in a soundless scream, he hurled gourd down with all his strength, and it shattered against the packed-earth floor, his 662 pebbles representing each month of his 55 rains (years) flying out, ricocheting wildly in all directions. (360)

At a metaphorical level of representation, it can be said that Kunta's resignation to fate, while perhaps dabbing himself in a cloak of failure because he was not able to manipulate his personal dreams into reality, could be considered. But this experience significantly opens our inner eyes to the reality that whether we accept it or not, believe it or not, we would, if we do not prepare ahead for generations unborn, equally become *failures*, as individuals, despite the privilege we now enjoy as a result of the gallant efforts of Kunta Kinte and others unknown today. Therefore, it is perhaps bizarre to state categorically that Kunta Kinte is not the *saviour* of the African American race. But still, his role remains exceptionally phenomenal. The fate now lies in the actions and inactions of his daughter, Kizzy, not to or to uphold the same song of Afrocentrism, passed from his father to her.

Similarly, Kizzy is not the *saviour*; neither her son, Chicken George, nor her grand children down to Alex Haley. The point is that these people, as individuals, have done their part in recognising and appreciating their *roots*, which, no doubt, have become unquestionably fruitful, even though it is not yet *uhuru* for the entire people of African descent. The argument is that the total emancipation of the African and African American societies squarely lies in the collective, consistent search for both individual and collective identity through a continuous

introspect into their *past*. Haley did not take this argument literally. And it paid off.

Africans and African Americans must be willing to recognise the hard-earned precepts emphasised in *Roots*, learn from these in order to be prepared to face the physical, spiritual and psychological journey in search of identity in the course of finding solace and satisfaction in the complex pattern of life. Again, Afrocentrism should not be defined alongside the principle of hate, racism, or delinquency. It is certainly not about revenge. Conversely, it functions as a positively inclined counter hegemony, personal and collective towards the discovery of self within a collective identity. The conversation between Tom (Kizzy's grand child) lends credence to this assertion.

A morning when Tom had left his blacksmith shop to help his brothers, he recognised a lone rider along the road as the former Cavalry Major Cates, his uniform tattered and his horse spavined. Cates also recognised Tom, and riding near the fence, he reined up. "Hey, nigger, bring me a dipperful of your water!" he called. Tom looked at the nearby water bucket. He filled the dipper and walked to hand it to Cates. "Things is changed now, Mr Cates," Tom spoke evenly. "the only reason I brought you this water is because I'd bring any thirsty man a drink, not because you hollered. I jes' want you to know that." Cates handed back the dipper. "Git me another one, nigger." Tom took the dipper and dropped it back into the bucket and walked off, never once looking back. (549)

For everyone, especially people from African descent and, in fact, generations unborn, the question of identity would continually resurface - that strong urge, intense hunger to know one's heritage, who we are and where we come from. *Roots*, therefore, exhibits a universal motif - an appropriate metaphor towards individual and collective search for identity and reformative re-assertion. According to Haley (1992), "in all of us - black, brown, white, yellow - there is a desire to make a symbolic journey back to the touchstone of our family." One, therefore,

cannot but agree to his assertion that the novel, *Roots*, is indeed “a springboard to striving millions, regardless of colour”.

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