

Trafficking of African people in Alex Haley's Novel *Roots*

Asst. Lecturer Fawziya Mousa Ghanim *

Abstract

Alexander Murray Palmer Haley (1921-1992) was born in Ithaca, New York. In his ancestral village of Juffure, Haley listened to a tribal historian recount how Kunta Kinte, Haley's ancestor and the protagonist of his book, was captured and sold into slavery. When Haley finally published *Roots* in 1976, it caused a national sensation. Haley always maintained that the goal of his writing, and that of his life was simply to advance the oppressed cause of African people.

The Paper aim at discussing the ideological and cultural perspectives of trafficking African people. It attempts to expose the actual situation of slaved people ,and their struggle to survive.

The Paper is divided into two sections and a conclusion. The first section focuses on the definition of human trafficking. It is concerned with the emergence of African-American literature.

Section two concerns itself with the life and works of Alex Haley. It focuses on the issue of slavery or trafficking African people presented by Kunta and his predecessors in *Roots*.

The conclusion sums up the findings of the Paper.

Keywords: Trafficking African people, Alex Haley , human trafficking , African- American literature.

* University of Baghdad /College of Languages

1.Introduction

1.1. Trafficking of African People:

Human trafficking remains an uncompromising global problem, which has reemerged in recent times as a modernized form of slavery. Trafficking involves the movement of people from their country of origin to other destinations by any means for forced labour or services. The UN Trafficking Protocol , which was opened for signature in December, 2000, defines trafficking as:

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of abuse of power, or of position of vulnerability or of giving, or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person for the purpose of exploitation.¹

Samantha Dowling states that exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.²

Naturally, the western African people became subject to American traffickers. Hence, the history of African - American people in the United States was dated with the first ship that arrived to the American shore in 1619 and with the beginning of slavery in America. They didn't come to the United States from the 16th to the 19th centuries , they were rather taken from their families and from their land to English , Spanish, Portuguese , French countries.

The official slave trading business" started in 1517 when Bishop Bartolmeo de Las Casas permitted Spaniards to import African , and then the Spanish king Charles II, licensed Flemish traders to take slaves to Spanish Colonies, and later his monopoly was held by Dutch traders, Portuguese, French, English and the United States"³ . Since slavery till the first half of the twentieth century, the black people had been scorned , oppressed and humiliated . The slaved people were transported by what were called slave ships .Especially purchased African slaves to America. The most significant routes of the slave ships led from the north- western and western coasts of Africa to south America. The routes were called the Middle passage. **Karl Heinrich Marx**(1818 – 1883) , a Prussian-German philosopher, economist, sociologist, historian, journalist, and revolutionary socialist , had a forceful observation and opinion on the slavery of African people when he stated that:

Direct slavery is just as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credits. Without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that has given the colonies their value; it is the colonies that have created world trade, and it is world trade that is the pre-condition of large-scale industry. Thus slavery is an economic category of the greatest importance. Without slavery North America, the roost progressive of countries, would be transformed into a patriarchal country.⁴

In fact , most of economists , politicians and socialists highlight this point out of the plantations growth, and the need of cheaper hands working as the black people whose lives no one cared about and who were stamped by their skin color.

1.2. African- American literature:

African – American literature started orally and developed in the West at the period of colonization and the literary works are primarily slave narratives, such as Oludah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Oludah Equiano* (1789). It started with the works of Phillis Wheatley in the late of the 18th century. Reaching its high point with slave narrative of the 19th century , which included accounts of life under slavery and the struggle for justice and freedom.⁶

Slavery was the permanent ,everyday reality shaping the lives of black people, "which started to be changed by black authors, who discovered the power of the written word. Slavery was the central motif of great number of the contemporaneous black writing both before and after the Civil War(1861-1865)".⁵ Thus, most African-American writers wrote boldly about the period of black dehumanization. They hadn't any chance in the life of slavery and were regarded as properties or commodities.

The powerful outburst of African people after the civil rights movement(1950s) led them into national consciousness, calling for a new consideration about the period of slavery. The literary works traced back on the role of the historic black family and its ability to cope with slavery. At the turn of the 20th century, non-fiction works by authors such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington debated whether to confront or appease racist attitudes in the United States. During the American Civil Rights movement, authors such as Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks wrote about issues of racial segregation and black nationalism. Today, African-American literature has become accepted as an integral part of American literature, with books such as *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1975), by Alex Haley, *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker, which won the Pulitzer Prize; and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison achieving both best-selling and award-winning status.⁷ The African- American called for the necessity of language learning which was portrayed in their works especially written language.

The literary works were presentedz by ex-slaves and their quest for freedom," A freedom which in large part is the ability to allow the consciousness to develop without restriction"⁸ . While in the time of slavery , slaves were forbidden by law to learn , to read, or to write. They were devastated , beaten , murdered, and abused sexually and psychology physically.

2. Alex Haley's Voice:

Alexander Palmer Haley was an American author and story-teller, embarked on a journey to find his family origins and charted a new course for a larger family of African Americans and others whose ancestors were lost in the Oceans of time. He was born in Ithaca, New York, on 11 August 1921. The oldest child of Simon and Bertha Haley. His father graduated from Cornell university , his mother was a music student.⁹

He graduated from high school at the age of 15 and attended the State Teacher's College in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, for two years and, at the urging of his father, he enlisted in the Coast Guard in 1939. Haley signed up for a three-year

enlistment in the Coast Guard on 24 May 1939. He enlisted as a Mess Attendant Third Class, since the Mess Attendant and Steward's Mate ratings were the only ratings in the Navy and Coast Guard open to minorities at that time.¹⁰

He retired from the Coast Guard in 1957, pursuing a career as a writer. Early assignments with *Reader's Digest*, leading to his first major article an interview with jazz trumpeter Miles Davis for *Playboy Magazine*. His interview of Malcolm X resulted in his first major book *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which published in 1965. After finishing his book on Malcolm X, Haley began researching his own family history. He traced the names of Tom and Irene Murray, his great-grandparents, and found a *griot* (a story-teller), in Africa with knowledge of the Kinte family. His childhood memories became his inspiring source to verify his own family story. His searchable journey took 12 years and became the primary focus of his late first titled *Before This Anger*, an abbreviated version of the work published in 1974 by *Reader's Digest* which then renamed *Roots*, the completed book version was published in 1976.¹¹

It became an immediate bestseller. It was adapted into the wildly popular television miniseries of the same name. *Roots* won the Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award, received nine Emmy Awards, the Golden Award and many other awards. He published *A Different Kind of Christmas* which deals with the Underground Railroad in 1990. Nearly finished with a book called *Henning*, a personal memoir about Haley's grandparents' home town. And Haley spent much time lecturing around the country. On a lecture trip to Seattle in 1992, Haley suffered a heart attack and died at age seventy-one.¹²

Haley was called the father of popular genealogy when he presented incredible challenge with verifying his genealogy back to its African origins. Actually, Haley's early ancestors were enslaved and slaves were listed anonymously by owner. Moreover, American slavery system sought to obliterate a slave's 'personhood', particularly memories linked to an African homeland, and native language, religion, culture were either erased or went underground. Hence Haley was fortunate that his grandmother and her ancestors presented strong oral references to African vocabulary, words and names that Haley traced to a small Mandinka village in the back country of Gambia. They also included the name 'Naplis' Annapolis, Maryland, where Haley determined that his ancestor Kunta Kinte first arrived.¹³

His novel *Roots* won Pulitzer prize and reconstructed the portrait of African-American slaves, when they were portrayed by white writers as primitive black savages and superstitious cannibals. Jason Berry admitted that "no other novelist or historian has provided such a shattering, human view of slavery"¹⁴. Haley attempted to reveal the secrets of human chains, when he characterized his novel by factual and fictional details. He gave African-Americans a sense of their own beginning.

2.1. Roots: The Saga of an American Family

In *Roots*, Alex Haley recreates the story of his family, providing a unique record of Afro-American history, based on twelve years of genealogical research in Africa, Europe and the United States.

The forcible introduction of Africans to the West is dramatized by the capture and sale of Kunta Kinte, Haley's great grandfather, while the suffering and survival of four generations of Kintes underscore the slave experience. In fact *Roots* may be regarded as "the first serious challenge to existing popular mythology on the black man's past ,that blacks are without a past, without a culture of their own and therefore, inferior and unworthy people"¹⁵.

Haley depended on drawing real people , day-to-day activities, conversations and interrelationships. He began to restructure popular belief about the black experience .Haley knew his ancestors' African name through Kizzy, who passed it on to her son George, whose son Tom passed it on to his daughter Cynthia, who passed it on to her grandson Alex. Kunta , his wife Bell, his daughter Kizzy and her son George are archetype people who represent the struggle of most African – American and what they have faced . As Chris Haley, Alex's nephew, declares that *Roots* represents "all African – Americans with enslaved background and whose stories , equally heroic and tragic never will be known".¹⁶

The *Roots* saga begins with the birth of Kunta Kunte who is captured and abducted to America around the age of seventeen. After horrifying sea voyage he is sold at a slave auction and becomes a field worker at the plantation of his owner. Not able to reconcile himself to his fate, he tries to escape whenever a possibility suggests itself. Yet his fourth attempt is fateful. Chased by slave catchers he is caught and half of his right foot is chopped off.

Although he is cured by a white doctor, Kunta's new master, he is crippled for the rest of his life, and has to abandon all hope of freedom. A few years later he gets married and fathers a daughter Kizzy whom he repeats his story of capture, and teaches her some African words so that she will know who she is and where she comes from. When Kizzy is sold for breaking the rules of Kunta's owner, she ends up at a disreputable slave owner who immediately rapes her. After giving a birth to a son, she is telling to him and afterward to his children a story of their great-grandfather. The narrative goes on through the American Civil War and all the events leading to the abolition of slavery until it reaches Haley's grandmother who was two years old "when her father, Tom, and grandfather, Chicken George, led a wagon train of recently freed slaves westward to Henning, Tennessee"¹⁷ to settle down and start a new free life.

In the opening scenes of *Roots* , Haley sets up African culture and religious background. Kunta grows up in the village of Juffure. He is taught to read and write, cite Koran and respect principles of his community. He also learns to survive in strange environment, and listens to elderly people's advice. Kunte belongs to this village which affected his coming life.

The novelist depicts it as a paradise - like place but at the same time he refers to a hidden evil by grandmothers' stories , and Toumani (a trainer of goats herding) warns of the worst type of people who " Even a worse danger than lions and panthers were toubob and their black slate helpers, who would grab people and take them off to a distant place where they were eaten"(p.37) .

Haley gradually sheds light on the word "slave" throughout Kunta's question to his father, when he asked him " Fa, what are slaves?" Omoro answers after several minutes "slaves aren't always easy to fell from those who aren't slaves"(p.69). At this point Haley foreshadows Kunta's fate. Actually Kunta is informed by his father about the slaves and their masters and their hero slave Sundiata who had run away from his hated master. Eventually, Kunta and other people are taken from their families .

Haley exposes Kunta's feeling and strength will , besides his persistent to keep his roots. According to the text Kunta is transmitted with other people to the plantation of cotton and renamed by whites as" Toby". His obligatory journey is filling with pain, humiliation, beating , chaining and hunger. "Kunta wondered if he had gone mad. Naked, chained, nd endless oppression". Haley describes Kunta's first painful impression in the cargo:

when he becomes mad ,naked, bleeding , shackled, he awoke on his back between two other men in a pitch darkness full of steamy heat and sickening stink and a nightmarish bedlam of shrieking, weeping, praying, and vomiting. He could feel and smell his own vomit on his chest and belly. His whole body was one spasm of pain from the heatings he had received in the four days since his capture. (p.200)

The place where slaves are tied to one another by chains is also described . There is no space for one's moving: "[Kunta]pulled lightly on the chain; it seemed to be connected to the left ankle and wrist of the man he had fought with... and they were all so close that their shoulders, arms, and if any of them moved even a little"(p.201).

The novel illustrates man's suffering to achieve his biological needs for foods and security, particularly when he/she belongs to different culture and society. By Kunta remembers of how as "devout Moslems ,they would rather have died than eat the flesh of the wild pigs."(p.7). Kunta also thinks of his prayer and how he will perform it. He fails to escape four times while he was always chased by toubob(white men), and lastly they damage his right leg. At this particular moment, he declares the death of precious thing within the self, but there is a space for hope.

Though it shamed [Kunta] to admit it, he had begun to prefer life as he was allowed to live it here on this plantation to the certainty of being captured and probably killed if he tried to escape again. 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.(p.287)

He is surrounded by darkness, screaming , naked women, and filthiness of the place. Haley is aware of the aggressiveness and unfairness in slave ships for eighty to ninety days .

Slaves were regarded as things that presumably did not have any feelings or even needs. They had to obey their masters without any protest or even a sign of disagree. Deprived of human and civil rights, they could be killed, sold or taken from their families:

'It's a law niggers can't carry no gun, even no stick that
Look like a club[...] law say can't be no nigger funeral if
Dey think it's a meeting' law say you kill anybody White, you hang: kill
nother nigger, you jest gits whipped.
Law' gainst teachin' any nigger to read or to write, or
Giving 'any nigger any book'.(273-74)

John Simkin points out that African were not allowed to continue with their rituals related to the faith in Allah and a usage of drum, the main instrument used for transforming information in Africa, was also prohibited.¹⁸ One of the slave complains that "Dey's even a law' gainst niggers beatin' any drums- any dat African stuff". (274) Haley conveys even the submissiveness of black people and how they are converted forcefully into Christianity in addition to their trafficking. As Kunta thinks that some black people are worse than white people. They blindly and fearfully follow the orders of masters. After Kunta's life in the ship and his struggle to get his freedom, the novel traces deeply to the inner life of slaves and their differences and similarities as narrated by Kunta's observation and impression. Firstly, he doesn't cope with the strange life, but then secretly tries to learn language

of white people. This is because slaves shouldn't have opportunities to read or write and if their master know this kind of progress they will sell them to others. This is revealed by Fiddlers's warning of Kunta to keep Bell's secret: "if massa got the slightest hint that she could read: He would sell her away that same day"(p.373).

The novel elicits the social gap between the blacks themselves and how they tried to over controlled it. The despised attitudes of an African towards other slaves on the plantation started to change and gradually they found the way of mutual communication. They are practically forced to learn the language of white people because they don't want to isolate themselves:

The lessons continued through the following days
And stretched into weeks. To Kunta's astonishment,
He began to discover that he was becoming able not
Only to understand but also to make himself
Understood.(276)

Spoken language become their only weapon of getting information. There are "informers" such as the buggy drivers and black women who work in the houses of white people, they listen "at the keyhole of the dining room whenever the massa had guests".(299) When evening come and slaves finished their work, they gather and speak about news. As well as reading enabled slaves to get information from newspapers. The uprising of blacks in the North was took place by passing information from one to the other, and finally led to their emancipation.

Roots concentrates on several generations, narrating not only the slave life of Kunta, it also shows the enslavement of his daughter "Kizzy". violation of black women by her master was a fact at that time. Haley mentions that some slave owners abused Negresses just because they liked their bodies, but others raped them in order to expand the number of their slaves. Kizzy is sold to another person and taken from her family. She is raped by the "massa" at the same day of moving. Kizzy unconsciously denies her unbearable state: "she tried to deny to herself the unspeakable, unthinkable thing had really happened, but the lancing pains of her torn privates reminded her that it had" (570). She feels of "a deep uncleanness, a disgrace that could never be erased."(ibid.) In details, Haley portrays the broken soul of a young girl. Her only fault is that she tries to help her beloved Noah to escape.

Unwillingly, she becomes a mother, named her child Kunta while her master named him George. Even her son is perplexed about his different skin and asked her: "How I ain't black like you is Mammy", she said "people jes born what color dey is"(p.701). Some women are ashamed of having a child with lighter skin than was theirs" for all anyone had to do was compare her color and the baby's to know what had happened – and with whom.'(463)

Slaves are deprived of self-improvement and education besides their tremendous humiliation. As a result, *Roots* reflects the spirit of revolt and rebel among those slaves in different places as well as the fearing of white people. Here, Kunta retells his friends about the saying of his master that "Massa Waller went on to say that he had read somewhere that over two hundred slaves outbreaks had occurred since the first ships came". (p. 396). And in another occasion: "slavery had recently been abolished in a northern state called Massachusetts".(p. 398). Hence, the life of enslavement by all its corrupted means failed to stop black people's quest of freedom and integrated life for themselves and their children.

Notes

¹ Amadu Sesay and Kehinde Olayode, *Regionalization and the War on Human Trafficking in West Africa*, (Bordeaux: 2008), p.6

² Samantha Dowling and Karen Moreton, *Trafficking for the Purpose of Labour Exploitation: A Literature Review*. <http://www.Home official line report>, 2013, p. 16

³ Petr Zidek, *Two Views of American Slavery: The Character of Jim in Mark Twain's Novel Adventures of Huckleberry and the Character of Kunta Kinte in Alex Haley's Novel Roots*, M.A. thesis, (University of Pardubice: 2008), p. 5

⁴ Ken Lawrence, "Karl Marx on American Slavery", <http://www.sojournertruth.net/marxslavery.pdf>, (2010), p. 1

⁵ Martina Filova, *Establishment of the African American Image Via Literature*, a thesis (Masaryk University: 2010), p.7

⁶ wikipedia.org/wiki/African-American_literature, (12-2-2013)

⁷ Ibid., p. 1

⁸ Martina Filova, p. 12

⁹ <<http://www.kintehaley.org>> 23-2-2013

¹⁰ David Galens, *Novels for Students* (1998), <<http://www.gale.com>>

¹¹ <<http://www.kintehaley.org>>

¹² Ibid., 1

¹³ "Genealogy: Discovering Your Own Roots", <[http:// www.kunta Kinte.org](http://www.kunta Kinte.org)> 23-2-2013

¹⁴ Jason Berry, "In Memoriam", *Yearbook*, 1999, p. 345

¹⁵ Carole Meritt, "Looking at Afro- American Roots", *Phylon*, (1960), vol.38. No.2, p.211

¹⁶ Martina Filova, p.29

¹⁷ Alex Haley, *Roots*, <<http://www.Haley.root.com>> pp.1-2, all sequences quotations are taken from this edition.

¹⁸ John Skimkin, "USA History: Slavery in the United State", *Spartacus Educational*, <http://www.spartacus.school net.co.uk/ USA slavery . htm>.

Conclusion

Human trafficking is an old business. Haley highlights this issue throughout his controversial novel *Roots*. The dialectic of slavery history is shown by the struggle of Kunta, his family, and black people. Literary writings of the 20th century arrive the peak of modernity, creativity, novelty in themes, techniques, and characterization. Haley's attitudes reflect his genius spirit, specially his looking for his family roots for twelve years, imitating even slaves' miserable situation in slave-ships. He rises up the sense of identity among black people. By adapting his ancestors' history, he highlights like a propaganda for new caring reading of African-American history. Haley clarifies the shabby image of African character, declaring a petition of victimization in American colonies.

Haley also highlights the idea that history always written by the winners. The history of black people depends on oral tradition, whereby memories sometimes lack the capacity of keeping events without a written document. In fact, Haley's novel smashes the veil that covers inside. Implicitly and explicitly, he portrays the danger of slavery which has been represented by the raping of Man and Culture.

Roots is not only a piece of literary work or a historical record of exploited people. It is rather a historical civilian protest against the period of slavery and the cruelty of white people.

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تجارة الأفارقة في رواية الجذور للروائي الكس هيلي

م.م. فوزية موسى غانم*

المستخلص

ولد الكسندر موري بالمر هيلي (1921-1992) في ايثيكا- نيويورك. استمع إلى السجل التاريخي لقبيلته في قرية جوفورا وكيف أن جده الأعلى كونت كانتني قد أسر وبيع في سوق الرقيق. سبب نشر روايته *الجذور* تأجج الشعور الوطني. وأكد هيلي دائما بان هدفه من الكتابة تقديم قضية ظلم الأفارقة للرأي العام. يهدف البحث لمناقشة مفهوم ووجهات النظر الإيديولوجية و الحضارية لتجارة الأفارقة وحاول عرض الموقف الواقعي للعبيد وصراعهم من اجل البقاء. يقسم البحث إلى جزئين وخاتمة. ركز الجزء الأول على تعريف الاتجار بالبشر ومن ثم اهتم بضرورة ظهور الأدب الافرو- أمريكي. وركز الجزء الثاني على عرض حياة وأعمال الكاتب الكس هيلي ومن ثم مناقشة قضية العبودية وتجارة الأفارقة والتي مثلت في شخصية كانتو وسلفه في رواية *الجذور*. تلخص الخاتمة النتائج التي توصل اليها البحث.

*كلية اللغات