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Redefining African American Identity in Alex Haley's *Roots*

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Letter of Recommendation

Sangeeta Lama has completed her thesis entitled “Redefining African American Identity in Alex Haley’s *Roots*” under my supervision. She carried out her research from April 2023 to February 2024. I hereby recommend her thesis be submitted for viva.

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Abstract

*This research paper critically examines Alex Haley's *Roots* and discusses how it redefines African American identity. In doing so, it tries to show how African Americans were traditionally perceived. Subsequently, this paper challenges those stereotypes and re-establishes their identity. To achieve it, Critical Race Theory is employed as a theoretical modality. Under Critical Race Theory, the concepts of black consciousness as discussed by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* and double consciousness as stated by W.E.B Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* are applied. The paper reveals how the spirit of black consciousness and double consciousness is expressed in *Roots* and how these concepts in turn play roles in redefining African American identity. It also shows that the characters in the novel are exposed to brutality in the face of slavery but they endure every pain and hardship; thereby showing firm resilience and pride which forge their identity in a new light. Again, taking *Roots* as a representative text in which there is a story of a single African American family, the thesis has served as a medium to broadly redefine the identity of whole African American community. The institution of slavery dominated and marginalized African Americans and to justify their inferiority, they were stereotyped. This research work, however, by challenging those stereotypes and in turn redefining their identity sees the African Americans as the empowered ones. This shows it aligns with the spirit of black consciousness and in larger sense, with the idea of Critical Race Theory. Therefore, a deep exploration of African American identity has been carried out.*

Keywords: African-Americans, Identity, Black consciousness, Double-consciousness, Stereotype and Slavery

The research paper redefines African American identity by challenging the stereotypes held against them. For this, Alex Haley's novel called *Roots* is taken as the primary text. Alex Haley is an American writer who portrayed struggles of African Americans in his works. *Roots* was published in 1976 which narrates the life of Kunta Kinte who is sold as a young man into slavery in America. The story follows till seven generations of his descendants in which Haley himself is supposedly the last descendant.

When Kunta lives as a slave, others try to integrate him into American culture. However, he prides himself on his African background that allows him to stay true to his individuality. He is forced into slavery and given a new American name and a different way of life but he holds onto his Mandinka roots. His descendants who run down to several generations also never falter in their love for their African heritage and they never let each other forget about their ancestor Kunta's story. Again by conducting thorough genealogical research, Haley traces his African roots to Kunta Kinte from Gambia, West Africa. In this process, he reclaims his ancestral culture. This means that African Americans care about their history and culture and they also have rich cultural legacy which is one of the important indicators in redefining African American identity. So, the research argues that African identity as perceived in the past cannot be looked at as only inferior, submissive and barbaric because they have their own unique cultural heritage which they are proud of. It thereby challenges the dominant discourse of white superiority and redefines African American identity.

The research paper aims to critically analyze how the characters in the novel challenge the stereotypes held against their African American identity. It also aims to establish their identity in a new way and study the significance of redefining one's negatively perceived identity.

In the times of slavery, African Americans have become the victims of white supremacy. They were thought of as low humans with no culture and identity. This negative representation is even perpetuated in books, films and media. But, if we look into the matter

deeply, it is so that African Americans are humans too who cannot be always looked from belittling lens only. So, an attempt is made to redefine their identity; for which *Roots* acts as a supporting text. During this process, the paper tries to give answer of these research questions that aroused. They are- What are the stereotypes held against African Americans? Why were African Americans stereotyped? How do characters in *Roots* challenge the traditional view of African American identity?

The significance of the study is the research provides a fresh perspective as no previous research on redefining African American identity were carried out. So, the research could be informative to those who are interested in this topic. Besides this, the research is relevant to contemporary scenario in the light of race and identity as well.

As per the theoretical modality applied in this research, Critical Race Theory is used. Critical Race Theory is an academic and philosophical framework that focuses on investigating and challenging the ways in which race and racism intersect with legal and political systems and other social structures. It means that racism is operated systematically and the systemic racism is deeply rooted in legal systems and social structures which is challenged to create social justice by dismantling racial hierarchies.

Under Critical Race Theory, two theorists who are under the radar of my interest are Frantz Fanon and W.E.B. Du Bois. Frantz Fanon deals with black consciousness in his work *Black Skin, White Masks*. So, the discussion is carried out under the light of this concept. Similarly, Du Bois' concept of double consciousness is considered.

Black consciousness means black people challenging and dismantling racism and white supremacy by celebrating their cultural heritage and reclaiming their agency and identity that is devalued to empower black community. It is also a way to generate collective consciousness of black people as it promotes a sense of solidarity among them.

Double consciousness is a kind of psychological struggle experienced by African Americans as a consequence of being both black and American in a society that gives

importance to whiteness. As African Americans, they have their authentic African selves within them but dominant white culture which made them go through slavery and systemic racism force them to view through the eyes of others. As a result, they are living with a divided sense of self where they have to navigate their identity through both their own perspective and imposed perspective. This is what it means to be living with double consciousness.

Both these concepts of double consciousness and black consciousness are fitting in the discussion of Critical Race Theory. This is because it is black consciousness talks about challenging those ideologies that foster racism along with empowering black people. Similarly, double consciousness emphasizes how racism plays influential role in the construction of racial identities and subsequently, also emphasizes how in a racial society, the marginalized racial minorities negotiate their identity. Therefore, both concepts along with acknowledging marginalization of black people, question and challenge those ideologies that encourage racism and make efforts to bring about racial justice which align with the principal idea of Critical Race Theory.

There are various scholars and critics who have put forward their views on Critical Race Theory. In one article published in *The Washington Post* about Critical Race Theory, Marisa Lati argues, “Critical Race Theory is an effort really to move beyond the focus on finding fault by impugning racist motives, racist bias, racist prejudice, racist animus and hatred to individuals and looking at the ways in which racial inequality is embedded in structures in ways of which we are very often unaware” (What is Critical Race Theory and Why Do Republicans Want to Ban It in Schools?).

It is generally perceived that Critical Race Theory deals with the issue of racism by focusing on racist prejudice and racist bias. It is believed that racism is perpetuated by individual racist motives but Lati goes on to imply that Critical Race Theory is that lens which goes beyond looking at racism from this perspective only. It is so because she believes

Critical Race Theory, in fact, looks at racial inequality from larger perspective as something that is not caused by individual hatred but as something that is deeply embedded in societal structures like social, economic and political systems. And it is so that this very fact goes unnoticed from our awareness.

Regarding black consciousness, the founder of Black Conscious Movement, Steve Biko writes, "It is the most positive call to emanate from the Black world for a long time. Its unadulterated quintessence is the realization by the Black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their oppression . . . and to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetuate servitude" (Biko 20). Here, Biko explains that black consciousness is the realization when black people feel they should unite with each other for they share similar experience of racial oppression to break free from the chains of subjugation in a collective way. So, it emphasizes for black unity. Biko adds, "It is based on a self-examination which has ultimately led them to believe that by seeking to run away from themselves and to emulate the white man they are insulting the intelligence of whoever created them Black. The philosophy of Black consciousness, therefore expresses group pride and the determination of Blacks to rise and attain the envisaged self" (20). Thus, it is also an introspection which makes them realize that they need not imitate the dominant white culture in an attempt to run away from their truth of being black and escape from themselves believing that their own culture is inferior. Rather, it is the philosophy of black consciousness which tells blacks to be proud of who they are and work towards their empowerment.

In regards to double consciousness, Dickson D. Bruce contends:

Although in the essay Du Bois used "double consciousness" to refer to at least three different issues- including first the real power of white stereotype in black life and thought and second the double consciousness created by the practical racism that excluded every black American from the mainstream of the society, the double

consciousness of being both an American and not an American- by double consciousness Du Bois referred most importantly to an internal conflict in the African American individual between what was “African” and what was “American”. (4)

According to Bruce, Du Bois has addressed three aspects when he talks about double consciousness. They are- first, how white stereotype has impacted black people. Second is about practical racism that excludes black Americans from mainstream society and last one is internal conflict faced being African and American. Since white stereotype creates a division in how African Americans perceive themselves and how they are perceived by other, it creates double consciousness. Next, there is exclusion from mainstream society due to practical racism because African Americans don't have access to equal opportunity as whites. This exclusion is the reason for double consciousness as blacks feel like 'other'. Lastly, Du Bois puts forward that African Americans live with dual awareness because in one hand, they are conscious about their African heritage while on the other hand, they are influenced by American culture. So, internal conflict arises whether to embrace and adapt American culture or live with African identity.

Among different researches conducted in *Roots*, David Chioni Moore writes, "If one wishes to go back even seven generations it is not possible to find unitary “roots” because the dizzying lateral and longitudinal expansion of cousins and ancestors dissipates all notion of source" (17). There has been a dispute whether *Roots* is a depiction of real history or just the model of history. In this context, the above quote discusses that it is impossible to determine peoples' ancestry by tracing back to absolute single source. Haley gives account of seven generations in *Roots* and traces his lineage to Kunta Kinte. However, Moore argues that going back to seven generations is difficult due to complexity of family interconnections. For him, when one tries to find one's lineage to a starting point, it is challenging because of “dizzying lateral and longitudinal expansion of cousins and ancestors” which makes the task strenuous.

Gary B. Mills and Elizabeth Shown Mills want to know if *Roots* can be taken as a tool for Clio, i.e. if it can be taken as a resource to understand about past. So, they begin with the question: "Can *Roots* be accepted as a pioneer work of black family history, or is it a delusion that encourages mediocre scholarship in the nascent field of Afro-American genealogy and relegates black family history to the academic dark ages from which Caucasian genealogy has already emerged? In short, is *Roots* a legitimate tool for Clio?" (4). They want to know whether *Roots* is reliable as a pioneer work of black family history and can be taken as a legitimate resource for the study of history. Then they argue, "The degree of discrepancy which exists between the Haley family chronicle and documentable facts inevitably calls into question both the legitimacy of *Roots* as "history" and its very essence as an expression of one family's heritage" (23). It means that there are differences in Haley's family's chronicle present in *Roots* and other official documents. The authors write, "[B]oundless number of other documents exist which undeniably contradict the identifications, relationships, ownerships, and other specific facts that are crucial to the story" (8). They have given various evidences of the inconsistencies and they have done so by corroborating with the documents.

For instance, Haley has stated that his ancestor Kunta Kinte arrived at Annapolis on September 29, 1767 via Lord Ligonier and in the story, Kunta who is given a name Toby is handed to William Waller by his brother John Waller. When Haley conducts the research and writes about a deed dated on September 5, 1768 in which it was mentioned that John Waller had transferred land, goods and a slave named Toby to William Waller, he becomes sure of his ancestor which he had only heard from the mouth of his other family members. However, in the documents consulted by these two authors, the name Toby comes on public record when John Waller had mortgaged Toby and other slaves during financially troubled time. These documents were all dated before September 1767, i.e. before Haley's account of Kunta's arrival. So, these authors have established that Toby was not Kunta Kinte. Similarly, what has been said about William Waller in *Roots* also contradict County records. The

identity of Bell as Toby's wife couldn't be found in existing records. In the novel, Ann Waller is said to be only slightly elder than Kizzy but it was found that she was already "a grown woman long before Kizzy supposedly was born" (12). Similarly, all Waller documents failed to produce a slave named Kizzy and other slaves mentioned in *Roots*. These differences make one question about the legitimacy of *Roots* as historical work. It also raises unreliability for *Roots* to be called as a representative work of family heritage narrative.

Similarly, in another work, Donald R. Wright writes, "And just when I was finding memories of the slave trade in the Gambia River to be disappointingly thin, in the mid-1970s, a fresh story came along, bathed in hype and claims of authority. Gambians quickly adopted it for their own and massaged it to fit their needs" (299). Wright notes that what he had learnt about the history of slave trade in the Gambia River was not abundant and it was something that was not much talked about. Then, Alex Haley published *Roots* and after its publication, the book got very famous. It claimed to be a work of thorough research, thus establishing itself as a factual work. Though its historical accuracy is debatable, Gambians differently perceived and interpreted their history by adjusting to Haley's story. As the book vividly shows how Africans were transported to North America through Atlantic slave trade, what they were believing about Atlantic slave trade was quickly replaced by their belief in what was portrayed about it in the book.

Not only that, the Gambians adopted the story to fit to their purpose. So, Wright further says, "[T]hat the story line of *Roots*, however lacking in fact, will continue to be what is remembered by many as the reality of the Atlantic slave trade" (316). *Roots* is a historical fiction and the author must have exercised some dramatization in the book by taking creative liberty, so it cannot be said to accurately represent history. Despite this, the book had so much impact upon people that they believed whatever it presented was absolutely true. This was also the case with Atlantic slave trade. People began to look Atlantic slave trade with the lens of *Roots*. They believed that the actual representation of the historical period covering

Atlantic slave trade was as shown in *Roots*. It is for this reason, Wright says, "It is as if Haley created a fiction about the slave trade, then that fiction became the accepted truth, and memory of the fiction itself blurred over time, taking our understanding of history further from the mark" (304). It is implied that though Haley created fiction about slave trade, it was embraced as the truth.

While one past research has stated that Haley's claim about *Roots* to be an actual history of his family and tracing the lineage to one single source Kunta could be wrong because tracing one's lineage across seven generations to a single origin is complicated; another research possesses a question if *Roots* can be a legitimate tool for Clio and argues that due to inconsistencies found between public records and Haley's account of his familial history as narrated in the novel, *Roots* cannot be established as the legitimate resource for the study of history. Yet, another research showcases that immense popularity of *Roots* had a huge impact on the people of Gambia about how they remembered Atlantic slave trade. However, this research is focused on how there is redefining of African American identity in *Roots*. While other works have gone into historical accuracy of the text and its other themes, this paper delves into challenging pre-held ideas about African Americans and showing them in new light.

One of the stereotypes held against African Americans is that they are less intelligent. They were treated as meagre in matter related to brain and were considered not apt to learn things. This is expressed in the quote- "Black children were typically regarded as not having as much innate physical capacity to learn as whites" (Miller 79). Right from the beginning of their life, black children are segregated from white children with a belief that they are intellectually inferior. This is because it was believed that black children do not have same level as white children when it comes to learning capacity. They were labelled to have innate defect. This questioning in their intelligence set a negative avenue in their path of education as "[a] unique characteristics of what it means to be Black in America-an integral dimension

of African American identity- was the belief that education was for whites” (Davis 56). Because it was thought that whites have innate learning capacity and blacks are lacking in that department, the world of knowledge was only meant for whites. The idea that blacks are meant to do works requiring physical strength and are not at all built for education was common. However, both Fanon and Haley have something different to say. As per Fanon, “Hey, I’d like you to meet my black friend . . . Aimé Césaire, a black agrégé from the Sorbonne . . . Marian Anderson, the greatest black singer . . . Dr. Cobb, who discovered white blood cells, is black . . .” (76). Fanon mentions William Montague Cobb who was the first African American to do Ph.d in anthropology. He was both a physician and a professor. Similarly, Aimé Césaire was an author, poet and politician. Both of them were men of knowledge and they were black. Furthermore, he avers:

Negroes are savages, morons, and illiterates. But I knew personally that in my case these assertions were wrong. There was this myth of the Negro that had to be destroyed at all costs. We were no longer living in an age when people marveled at a black priest. We had doctors, teachers, and statesmen. OK, but there was always something unusual about them. “We have a Senegalese history teacher. He’s very intelligent. . . . Our physician’s black. He’s very gentle.” (77)

In this quote, Fanon addresses the deeply ingrained stereotype that blacks are only morons and illiterate. This was done to marginalize black people so that they could always rule over blacks but he comes with a strong voice that such assertion of blacks being moron is wrong. He contends that such idea should not be allowed to take root. He wants to empower black people by pointing out that there are black professionals like doctors, teachers and statesman and it is black consciousness that celebrates black achievements. Despite being deprived of educational opportunities, they have raised themselves from what few means they could get their hands into. This is an achievement in their part. If they did not have learning capacity,

they would not have become professionals. This also simultaneously disproves that blacks are illiterate and have less intelligence.

Roots redefines African American identity from dimwits to intelligent people. Haley brings the context of a slave who had become a fine doctor and had become famous: “[I]n New Orleans a white doctor named Benjamin Rush had written recently that when his longtime black assistant, a slave named James Derham, had learned as much medicine from him as he felt himself, he had set him free. ‘Ain’t he de one what become a doctor hisself and got even mo’ famous dan de man what learned him?’ asked Bell” (Haley 328). He is one representative of black intellectuality through which it is clear that blacks are no less in mind. They are not only about physical strength but are also equally mentally capable. Haley suggests that a slave named James Derham’s learning medicine and surpassing white doctor means blacks can excel in education, thereby debunking the notion that they are not academically sound.

In another instance, Haley mentions other real-life black intellectuals who have made intellectual contributions to the society. “An’ what ’bout dat Phyllis Wheatley what writes dem pomes white folks say so fine, an’ dat Gustavus Vassa what writes books?” (400). In this quote, Phyllis Wheatley and Gustavus Vassa have been mentioned. Phyllis was a slave who learned to read and write and became the first published African American author of a book of poetry. Gustavus Vassa who was also a slave showed his intelligence as a writer particularly in his work *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* which succeeded in the passage of the British Slave Trade Act 1807 that ended slavery. So, these two personae were learned men which suggests that African Americans are also good in education.

There are other characters in *Roots* who got opportunity to be educated and have shown love for education. For example, “Cynthia was graduated in 1883” (Haley 653), “As was only expected of her, Bertha achieved consistently high grades studying pedagogy, to

become a teacher” (Haley 660), “Simon was going to study for his master’s degree in agriculture at some ‘Cornel University’” (Haley 662), “Dad sold the lumber company for Grandma, and moved now into being a professor of agriculture” (Haley 667) and “Successively out of the U.S Army Air Force, Morehouse College, then the University of Arkansas Law School, George was hotly campaigning to become a Kansas State senator” (Haley 670). The mentioned characters pursued education with great zeal and achieved success in it. This depicts that African Americans value education and they are no inferior in their minds to grasp it. They give no less importance to be educated. It thereby redefines their identity by challenging the stereotype of having low I.Q with no knack for education.

Similarly, another stereotype held against African Americans is that they are foolish and stupid but there are some evidences in *Roots* which proves otherwise. Haley writes about Kunta sharing stories in slave quarter about the successful runaways who freed themselves. He tells of “a high-yaller butler and a black stable hand having stolen a buggy, horse, and fine clothing and a hat that the high yaller wore while he pretended to be a rich massa loudly cursing his black buggy driver whenever he drew within the earshot of any white patrols they met along their rapid buggy ride into the North and automatic freedom” (Haley 393-394). The enslaved required passes or permission from their masters even to travel from one place to another. Their movement was extremely controlled. In such situation, making way for freedom, that too by deceit of the white paterollers was unimaginable. However, they outwitted the paterollers by using numerous tricks and escaped to freedom.

Similarly, there was another “slave who always galloped his mule almost into the “paterollers”” faces before halting and unrolling with a flourish a large, fine print document that he said would explain his urgent errand for his massa-gambling always correctly that the illiterate white crackers would have him on rather than admit they couldn’t read” (393-394). Thus, Haley has presented stories of how those enslaved employed different tactics to navigate their way through a difficult restrictive situation. By using creative ways, they made

a fool out of those who were in power. It was not an easy thing in such harsh circumstance to even imagine about freedom but they were mindful to employ different tactics to actually make it to freedom. By using different crafty means, they have shown their strategic side. Through this, Haley aims to show that the perception of African Americans being foolish is wrong. Rather, they have cunningness and ingenuity in them.

Fanon writes, “Have I read it correctly? I give it an even closer reading. On the other side of the white world there lies a magical black culture. Negro sculpture! I began to blush with pride” (81). Here, “closer reading” indicates that Fanon is deliberately trying to explore black culture’s affluence by challenging the stereotypes made by dominant culture. He also emphasizes black consciousness by recognizing black culture as “magical black culture”. Contrary to the conception that blacks are barbaric and have no culture, he is saying blacks have culture and that too is magical. The phrase “I began to blush with pride” means he is filled with pride in his culture. This suggests a moment when he is having a positive awareness of his identity and heritage. To those who belittle black culture, he retaliates by expressing admiration towards it. So, he acknowledges the beauty of black culture and wants to instill respect and appreciation for one’s heritage. Similar incident takes place in *Roots* where characters acknowledge their African culture and are proud of their heritage which disproves the assumption that they are inferior or barbaric.

When Kunta and Belle’s daughter is born, Kunta wants to name her according to Mandinka tradition. According to this tradition, there were certain procedures which must be carried out while giving name to a child. For that, father alone was responsible for selecting baby’s name. Then he would keep that name in secrecy letting no one know about it until it was revealed to the child first. The father would tell the name three times into baby’s ear. Kunta was in haste to follow this ceremony because if he didn’t do it, he knew their master would name their daughter which he did not want at all. However, Belle opposes Kunta and he feels this way: “anger rose every time he thought of what disgrace it was that the wife of a

Kunte could want her child to bear some toubob name, which would be nothing but the first step toward a lifetime of self-contempt” (Haley 342). Kunta is angry as his wife belonging to African ancestry of Kinte is disapproving the tradition to embrace toubob (white) ways. But he doesn’t like to be departed from his unique cultural heritage and this divergence offends him. To him, having something like a white name for his child is a “life time of self-contempt” (Haley342). At last, he has his way and he names his daughter in African as Kizzy in a traditional manner. By performing the traditional naming ritual, Kunta connects his daughter with his heritage. In the time, when slave owners named the children born to enslaved parents and that too with the names having no cultural significance, Kunta practiced his culture and named his daughter following his cultural ritual. It means his traditional way is very important to him. It also reflects he cares about his culture. In a displaced setting and the oppressive situation where Kunta was, it would have been easy for him to follow white practices but he still values his culture. In his circumstances, he could have easily forgotten his culture and tradition but he was resolutely firm in honouring his culture. So, through Kunta’s act of practicing his culture, coupled with his unwavering commitment to his culture, it is clear that Haley has shattered the misconception that African Americans are devoid of culture. In fact, they have their own unique culture and they are not barbaric in this sense.

Black consciousness celebrates history and heritage of blacks. *Roots* too emphasizes this fact and in doing so redefines African American identity as something rooted in history and tradition, rather than just based on slavery. Haley in *Roots* outlines Kunta would teach Mandinka words to his daughter. She too gets interested in the language and asks Kunta the name of objects that she saw in Mandinka. This begins with Kunta once telling the name of objects around them while passing Spotsylvania County roads. He pointed at a tree and said “*yiro*”, road “*silo*”, a cow “*ninsemuso*” and a bridge “*salo*”. Another time, the rain poured suddenly upon them and he exclaimed “*sanjio*” and when the sun returned again, said “*tilo*”.

Kizzy would observe Kunta's mouth to know how these words were spoken which she tried to imitate herself and soon, she was able to say them too. (Haley 375)

Kunta telling the names of things in Mandinka language in such situation when there is fear of erasure of his culture is the indication that he is passing down cultural heritage to his daughter. The Mandinka words that she inherited from her father connects her to the African roots and helps in understanding her true identity. This establishes their identity as someone who is more than slaves. It is clear that they have rich heritage of their own. Another evidence is Kunta tells Kizzy how the slaves were brought from Africa to America naked in the ship and he continues further as "Even took our names away. Dem like you gitsborned here don't even know who dey is! But you jes' much Kinte as I is! Don't never fo'gitdat! Us'nsfo'fathers was traders, travelers, holy men-all de way back hunnds o' rains into datlan' call Ol' Mali!" (Haley 385). Kunta tells his young daughter that in the face of slavery which strips away their identity, it is easier to forget who they truly are because it only pins them down to being slaves. However, he suggests she should never forget her Kinte ancestry who were also people like traders, travelers and holymen and believe that she has a heritage. Here, Haley wants to showcase that African Americans are not only slaves but they are heritage holders too who have historical, cultural and ancestral background.

When Kizzy is raped by her master Tom Lea, she gives birth to a son and then Tom Lea names him George. To this, Kizzy feels: "Before she fell asleep, Kizzy decided that however base her baby's origins, however light his color, whatever name the massa forced upon him, she would never regard him as other than the grandson of an African" (Haley 438). A son is born to her when far removed from the loving shield of her parents and due to distance, there is no connection between the newborn and his grandfather Kunta. However, Kizzy is determined that she would never let this gap come between them because she thinks of linking him to his African ancestry. This shows Kizzy acknowledges the child's heritage and is not swayed under the influence of white power but is true to her heritage. Also,

“Kizzy, in turn, was no less seething at Sister Sarah’s demeaning implication about her wise stiffly dignified father and his beloved African homeland. She was surprised and pleased to discover that even George was irritated at what he felt was ridicule of his African gran’pappy” (Haley 454). Kizzy and George are sensitive to any form of derision aimed at their cultural heritage and cannot accept any mockery of their African roots. It depicts that they not only have their heritage but they also value and take pride in it.

By honoring the cultural heritage and passing it down to next generation, the characters are also preserving their heritage which shows that they are not primitive as perceived. The handing down of ancestral history to one’s descendants in *Roots* shows that they have a history and debunks the misconception that they have no history. There are many evidences in the text for this. The first one is when her daughter-in-law Matilda is pregnant, Kizzy tells her to share the story of KuntaKinte to her upcoming children. For this, Kizzy fills Matilda with Kinte’s history and the things he had told her. She tells, “‘Tilda, how come I’setellin’ you all dis, I jes’ wants you to understan’ how I wants datchile in yo’ belly an’ any mo’ you has to know all ‘bout ’im , too, on ’count of he’s dey great-gran’daddy” (Haley 509) . Kizzy tells her daughter-in-law to tell about their history to her future children. She wants her grandchildren to know that their great grandfather was Kunta Kinte who was captured from his homeland Africa and brought to the new land.

There is another similar evidence like this where Kizzy tells, “[A]ny y’all gitsmo’ chillunsfo’ I sees you ag’in, don’t forgit to tell ’em’bout my folks, my mammy Bell, an’ my African pappy name KuntaKinte, what be yo’ chillun’s great-great gran’pappy!” (Haley 583). She continues to say, “Hear me, now! Tell ’em ’bout me, ’bout my George, ’bout yo’selves, too! An’ ’bout what we been through ’midst differen’ massas. Tell de chilluns all de res’ about who we is!” (583). Kizzy also tells to her grandchildren to tell their children about herself, and her son George along with Kunta. In these quotes, Kizzy is asserting that they have a history which shouldn’t be forgotten by future generation at any cost. She

emphasizes to embrace their history and acknowledge the past which has shaped their present.

Soon after Matilda and George's first son Virgil is born, George narrates about his grandfather Kunta's life to the new born. George who used to be so eager to know about Kunta is happy to share what he knows about his grandfather to his son. He tells his young one that he was African and he had African names for different things like "ko" for a guitar, "KambyBolongo" for a river. Additionally, he tells, "He say he was choppin' a tree to make his l'il brother a drum when it was fo' mens come up an' grabbed 'im from behin'. Den a big ship brung 'imcrosst de big water to a place call 'Naplis. An' he had runned off fo' times when he try to kill demdatcotched 'im an' dey cut half his foot off!" (Haley 510). It is evident that George is aware of his history which was passed down by Kunta to Kizzy. Though his newborn son cannot understand what his father is saying, it is of utmost importance to George that his son too knows about their history. So, out of this respect for the history, he makes sure that his son also realizes their history. In the novel this process of passing family story is prevalent till seventh generation. They hold a collective memory and this collective memory shapes their identity and it has other functions too like said in "collective memory thrives on a remembrance of the past that "forges identity, justifies privilege, and sustains cultural norms" (Welburn 167). The characters do not let each other forget their history. They find comfort in the echoes of their ancestors' struggle and are bound by the ancestral ties of their history. Haley too has been hearing about their history since his childhood. Based on that oral history, he conducts a thorough genealogical research later and finds out that there was indeed an ancestor named Kunta Kinte who was from Africa. Through this exploration, Haley is reclaiming his African identity which highlights the importance of African history. He even wrote the whole book as his celebration of his history. Thus, it redefines African Americans as the community having historical depth and disproves the idea of them not having a history false.

Another stereotype against African Americans is that they are passive victims of slavery. As Bass contends, “While these images of animalism were constructed with little sense of direction, other characterizations depicted Blacks as subservient hired help whose primary desire was to please their white employers” (Bass 368). This statement reinforces the idea that African Americans are subservient and yield all the time to whites' authority.

However, *Roots* break this idea and advocated that they are not childlike who accept everything that comes their way. Kunta observed that though the slaves were all obedient and agreeing in front of the whites, this was not their true feelings towards whites because “[h]e had by now many times witnessed the blacks’ grinning faces turn to bitterness the instant a toubob turned his head away” (Haley 226). Also, “[h]e had seen them break their working tool on purpose, and then act totally unaware of how it happened as the “oberseer” bitterly cursed them for their clumsiness” (226). They couldn’t fight the whites noticeably but they were silently fighting their fights. This is also clear in this line: “he had seen how blacks in the field, for all their show of rushing about whenever the toubob was nearby, were really taking twice as much time as they needed to do whatever they were doing” (226). The black field workers' deliberate slowing down of work when white oberseers were not around and only working diligently when white oberseers paid attention to them shows that they do not always make accommodations for white people.

White people treated them cruelly and there is a stereotype that blacks are known for their tolerance, but what Kunta has heard about other blacks in his two years’ time while driving buggy for the master says that they can respond with a stone when someone throws them a brick. He had heard that some black cooks served the food containing their bodily wastes to their masters. Not only that "he had been told of white folks’ meals containing bits of ground glass or arsenic, or other poisons. He had even heard stories about white babies going into mysterious fatal comas without any trace of the darning needle that had been thrust by housemaids in their soft heads where the hair was thickest” (Haley 292). The slaves were

only putting an innocent face in front but behind the back, they were scheming against whites. They were not only accepting everything that happened to them. Rather they showed their teeth too as Kunta had heard that “some black who had hidden muskets and other weapons and vowed to kill their massas or mistresses, or both and put their plantations to the torch” (Haley 292). Some blacks were prepared to go so far by taking it to a level of violence as well. It was too dangerous for them to be seen with weapons but in their act of defiance, they were ready to take such measure. Also, “there were some men among those he worked with who would meet in secret to discuss anything good or bad that happened to slaves elsewhere and to consider any action they might take to help” (292). Though secretly meeting to discuss good or bad things that happened to slaves in other places and thinking what actions need to be considered for help is not a strong reaction as killing or burning plantations, it is a reaction nonetheless. However inconsequential their attempts were, they did not stay dumb. They resisted with whatever little resource they had. So, they were not being helpless victims only.

It is evident that it is not like the slaves did not feel anything against the wrong done to them. Obviously, they could not be vocal and raise strong voice or take drastic measures against whites. Their mouths did not speak but their hearts spoke volume. Outward, they appeared silent but inside they were screaming for fairness. Like mentioned in the quotes above, they purposefully broke the working tools provided by whites, delayed the work, mixed their body wastes and poison in white masters’ food, mysteriously put white babies to death and secretly held meetings to help slaves. These actions show that they were not reactionless who accepted everything as it came. It is said: ““Even when they didn’t run, wrote historian Howard Zinn, “they engaged in sabotage, slowdowns and subtle form of resistance which asserted, if only to themselves and their brothers and sisters, their dignity as human beings”” (Williams). Yes, they were not direct in their ways but they revolted in a

subtle manner and asserted their dignity. It opposes the stereotype that they were submissive and redefined their identity as being defiant.

The slave characters in *Roots* longed for freedom. Though they could not directly participate in slave revolts for freedom, in their hearts they always desired freedom. They did not accept their situation as it was but wanted change. As their desire for change, they did not stay quiet and still but did what they could which is pass information to each other from what they could gather from their white masters. Of course, getting hold of newspapers to be informed was impossible for them. So, their only source was listening to the white peoples' conversation as depicted in the following quotes. "The frequent bits of news that Belle contributed would sound as if she had been discussing them with the massa himself, but she finally admitted that she had been listening at the keyhole of the dining room whenever the massa had guests" (Haley 278). Also, "[o]n the opposite side, the waiting while customers generally sat on the split-log benches that Tom had set up for them, positioned carefully just within his earshot, though far enough away that the whites didn't suspect that as Tom worked, he was monitoring their conversations" (Haley 600). It was very risky for them to be knowing of what was happening around them because white masters did not approve of it. But they collected information- sometimes from eavesdropping the white masters and sometimes pretending not to listen to white peoples' conversation while they were silently absorbed in it. Thus collected information didn't reach to them in easy way but they partook the difficulty and from the information gathered in such way, they discussed their situation, they talked about what slaves were doing elsewhere, they talked about slave revolts and what white people were up to. Basically, their talk revolved around freedom. This way of collecting information and discussing them to decipher what it meant in their quest for freedom shows they were not passive victims of slavery who didn't do anything for their goal. They wanted to know their status for freedom and for this, they always gathered information from various means which they shared with all concerned. So, they took

whatever small step under their means in the hope of changing their situation. They took matter into their hands and it shows their agency.

Fanon asserts that the narrative of blacks being inferior will be fiercely opposed. He writes:

It [color prejudice] is nothing more than the unreasoning hatred of one race for another, the contempt of the stronger and richer peoples for those whom they consider inferior to themselves and the bitter resentment of those who are kept in subjection and are so frequently insulted. As colour is the most obvious outward manifestation of race it has been made the criterion by which men are judged, irrespective of their social or educational attainments. The light-skinned races have come to despise all those of a darker colour, and the dark-skinned peoples will no longer accept without protest the inferior position to which they have been relegated. (77-78)

In this quote, Fanon says that white people have made black people inferior on the basis of their skin color and dominated them throughout. But he comes up with a voice that this consigning to inferiority will not be made to continue because black people will not accept their inferiority. Blacks will refuse and not live by the belief that they are inferior to whites. They will protest for the injustice done to them. Black consciousness is vivid in this quote as it is the notion of black consciousness to challenge the oppressive system and beliefs that support racism. It is black consciousness which by raising black peoples' awareness on historical injustice that they have faced empowers them to dismantle the structure that encourages racism. And when someone challenges the system, it shows he is not a mere puppet but has agency of his own. This spirit is well exhibited in *Roots*.

Kunta does not like his status as a slave and wants to be free. So, he tries to escape several times from the enslavers. In one of his such attempts, the captors catch him and punish by cutting part of his foot. So, the consequence of being caught was very dangerous. Yet, he risked his life and acted guided by his own purpose. His attempts show that he is

protesting the oppressive structure. His going against the system that is so powerful and risking his life for freedom shows that he is acting on his sole desire to get freedom which shows his agency.

Another character called fiddler who is also a slave works for Master Waller as a musician. He says, “‘Took me playin’ over nine hunnud times fo’ white folks to dance, an I sho’ di’n’t know if I’d ever make it, so I di’n’t talk ’bout it wid nobody—not even you —’til I done it! African, I got dat seven hunnud dollars what massa long time ago tol’ me I’d have to earn to buy myself free!’” (Haley 401). Fiddler plays for white masters and he gives what he earns to Master Waller. Still he is saving little portion that he gets to buy his freedom. He is patiently and tirelessly working for it each day in the hope of being free one day. Saving penny after penny shows he is not a passive victim of slavery because he is working under his means and capacity for what he desires. So, he is an active agent to act on his own will who is working to shape his own narrative.

Tom is learning to be blacksmith. When he visits his family for Thanksgiving, his father Chicken George says, “‘Wid two us, I knows we can do it!’ said George, beaming. “‘Make this family ’mount to sump’n! Us all got up Nawth, raisin’ chilluns an’ gran’chilluns free like folks was meant to! What you say boy?’” (Haley 556). In this quote too, their desire for freedom is evident. They have to save penny by penny to earn their freedom because large part of their earning- Chicken George’s earning from cock fighting and Tom’s earning from blacksmithing- has to be given to their master allowing them to keep only little. And they are not talking of freeing themselves only but all the members of their family which is many. It would take long time with what they could save but they are willing to do it no matter how long would it take. This is because they want to bring change in their lives and give something precious to their family. Most importantly, they believe they could do it. This willingness in them to work hard for freedom shows agency in them.

Tom Lea has promised Chicken George his freedom paper when he returns from England but after returning back, when George brings this matter, Lea, who is now always in drunk state gives no sign of being heard. He is angered and tells that he still plans keeping George as his game trainer. Not to anger his master further, George tries to please him and makes him drink a lot. When Lea is drunk out, George searches for the paper in bedroom and gets it. This is how he becomes free. Getting into a white man's bedroom is beyond any black man's imagination but he succeeds in getting hold of the paper; that too without his master's notice. It shows to get freedom that his heart desired most, he has taken matter into his hands. He is not ready to accept situations that don't favor him. He is willing to steer the course of his life by doing all he could do. He is acting as the master of his own fate.

The characters like Kunta, fiddler, Chicken George and his son Tom portray that African Americans are not only passive victims of slavery. They despised the repressive system and it's their non-acceptance – a subtle protest towards that system which made them challenge it by working towards freedom. This ability of theirs to act independently on their own desires redefines African American identity as having their own agency. It also breaks the stereotype that they are childlike because they don't need to be guided by white people in every step.

Blacks in general were perceived as objects. For example, “he had heard of such things being done- of unborn black babies being given as presents, wagered as gambling bets at card tables and cockfights” (Haley 337). They were thought as mere commodities to be bought and sold that “the dying massa of a pregnant fifteen-year-old black girl named Mary had willed as slaves to each of his five daughters one apiece of her first five babies. He had heard of black children being security for loans, of creditors claiming them while they were yet in their mother's belly, of debtors selling them in advance to raise cash” (Haley338). It was dehumanizing in white peoples' part to reduce them downright into objects and this idea is also reflected in another quote- “This coarsening reflected the impact of the scientific

racism that argued that non-whites, especially blacks, were less than human” (Lemons 105). So, they were devalued and not treated as humans. Their worth as humans was not at all counted but *Roots* challenges this idea by showing them as thinking, feeling beings. From character like Kunta’s emotions and realization which he feels after seeing white peoples’ riches when he takes his master to a party for the first time, it is proved so. “Kunta had been all but overwhelmed by conflicting emotions: awe, indignation, envy, contempt, fascination, revulsion- but most of all a deep loneliness and melancholy from which it took him almost a week to recover” (Haley 298). So, Kunta feels all sorts of emotions like awe, envy, fascination, etc and he experiences them deeply. Only a human is able to feel these varieties of emotions. Similarly, “He couldn’t believe that such incredible wealth actually existed, that people really lived that way. It took him a long time, and a great many parties to realize that they didn’t live that way” (Haley 298). Not only coming across to different set of emotions, Kunta also comes to a certain realization. He contemplates their position in the world and realizes how they are living as compared to whites. So, Kunta displays both feelings and consciousness and these two things are what separate human from an object. Similarly, there are no other black characters in the novel who are like non-living objects. They all feel, think and are full of soul which give their identity as humans. Thus, through these full of life characters, Haley challenges the idea that African Americans are only objects; rather he stresses their humanity.

Haley also redefines African American identity from lazy to hardworking people. All the character work hardly for their master. Kunta is very diligent in his driving work. Female characters like Bell and Malizy are rigorous in their kitchen work. Fiddler is sincere in being a musician. Kizzy, Sarah, Uncle Pompey, Virgil, Ashford, etc. are excellent field workers who yield a lot of crop from their hard work. Similarly, Chicken George and Mingo don’t say day or night in their cock training work. Tom equally labours in blacksmithing and even

garners lots of profit for his master. Such industrious nature of these characters revokes that African Americans are lazy. Peter Coclanis, too, writes:

According to Wood, as a result of their "quasi-independent" economic activities, African-American slaves along the rice coast were able to realize considerable personal autonomy and a measure of human dignity. Over time, they accumulated a good deal of property, and came to play significant roles as both producers and consumers in the economy of the Georgia low country, actually dominating certain key niches in the same. (876)

Such evidence of African Americans' involvement in economic activities in which from their role of both producers and consumers, they accumulated good amount of wealth. This says that they were able to do so with their hard work. This also supports the claim that they are not lazy and lethargic.

African Americans were identified with broken families as having fragmented family structure but Mills et al. say, "African American family systems preserve many customs and cultural practices of the highly complex civilizations of preliterate West African people whose patterns of family life were closely knit, articulated with kin and community, and structured to support the economic, social, and psychological life of the people" (31). It means the African American family system is such that it is based on kinship feeling within community that all members of a community are like family members to each other. It doesn't mean that there is no role of individual family. However, love and support among individual family members and even kinship feeling among members of black community show that their family is wholesome. The descendants of Kinte family proves it as well. They are with each other through every thick and thins. They all are aware of their common history which unites them and which also marks their collective identity. Not only within their blood related family members do they share their love, but this familial feeling is shown to other black members who live in the slave row with them. They were there for each other in times

of need and with mutual support from one another, they managed their lives. For example, when Kizzy gave birth to Chicken George, Malizy, Sarah and Uncle Pompey who were also the slaves of Tom Lea assisted in looking after the new born baby while Kizzy had to work in field. They took care of Kizzy and her son like their own family members. Similarly, the slaves always had one voice about their situation. Chicken George's family coming together in one consensus that they should work hard from their part to earn freedom shows how united they were as family. So, it reflects other idea of black consciousness too which is the unity and solidarity among blacks.

Similarly, African American identity was considered to be homogeneous because it was thought they all had same story of slavery to be told but *Roots* redefines their identity as multifaceted. This is because the characters have their own varied lived experiences. For example, if we take Chicken George and Tom, they both are slaves and know the pain of being suppressed as slaves but apart from just being slaves, Chicken George is a cock-fight trainer and Tom a blacksmith. They have their own experiences and stories to be shared as cock-fight trainer and blacksmith. As a cock-fight trainer and blacksmith they have seen, heard and experienced many things, or met different people which have enriched their lived experience than just being a slave. They also know what it means to be a cock-fight trainer and a blacksmith. They have more to say than being slaves only. These two are representative characters only. There are many African Americans who have many such varied experiences. So, all African Americans can't be put in the same box. This is further proven by the statement- "There are ten billion cultural artifacts of Blackness and if you add them up and put 'em in a pot and stew it, that's what Black culture is" (Touré 32). This emphasizes the heterogeneity of being African American. It means their identity cannot be reduced to single, uniform one because there is variety in it.

Du Bois has introduced the concept of double consciousness as:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (13)

African Americans undergo double consciousness where they struggle with their identity of being both African and American. So, in a single body, they are divided into two selves. As blacks they are aware of their identity being rooted in African heritage but as someone living in America, they are also living with American identity. Thus, they have to navigate their identity in American society with cultural heritage. As a result, a duality is caused because of these two aspects which causes conflict in them. Du Bois's idea is again well explained in: “DuBois explains that African Americans are forced to view themselves from, and as, the negative perspectives of the outside society. Having two antagonistic identities means that a lot of time and energy is spent negotiating and enduring the conflicts between who one is as a person and how one struggles to live with the misrepresentations of the outside world” (Black 394). Due to double consciousness, along with being aware of who they are, they have to be aware of how others perceive them too. And according to Black, “having one's own sense of self and also having imposed contempt for an ascribed self, having twoness, is what DuBois calls double consciousness” (394). Blacks know that their identity is shaped by African background and they also know within that, they are dignified humans. However, dominating white culture identified them as uncivilized, low humans. This makes them divided between two identities; whether to live with their own sense of self or with someone else's imposed self. So, Black has said that due to imposed representation of their identity, African Americans have to spend a lot of time and energy to negotiate the conflicts between who they are and how they are perceived. This concept is related to redefining African American identity because due to double consciousness, they can no longer say that their identity is

purely African. So, this means they have to define their identity in a new way which is complicated.

Regarding double consciousness, Howard and Evans also write, “Numerous scholars (Collins, 1991, 1998; Lawrence Lightfoot, 1994) have elaborated on this notion of dual or integrated identity where one acknowledges, discovers, and infuses the complex multiple selves and integrates them into their own individual identity” (433). Here, they are implying that double consciousness makes one to inculcate complex multiple identities into a single one. Not only that, “This process involves an embracing of one's historical familial origins and a constant rediscovering of self within an evolutionary context. This results in a dynamic rather than static definition of self” (Howard and Evans 433). Double consciousness also causes identity to be ever evolving and dynamic.

In *Roots*, there are evidences of double consciousness. Kunta who is captured at young age from his native African land is sold as a slave in America. Besides being subjected to harsh treatment, others try to assimilate him into new white culture but he deeply values his African culture and heritage. So, when he is forced an American name ‘Toby’, he resists it. ““See what I means? You got to put away all dat stuff” said the brown one, pointing to the charm. “Give it up. You ain’tgoin’ no wheres, so you might’s well face facks an’ start fittin’ in, Toby, you hear?” Kunta’s face flashed with anger. “Kunta Kinte!” he blurted, astonished at himself” (Haley 255). Kunta holds his African identity but other has imposed another identity. Other see him as Toby but he views himself as Kunta Kinte. So, his African identity and American experience need to be reconciled and there is tension between two identities. He knows he is Kunta but he has to acknowledge how others perceive him as Toby too. It’s like there are two identities within a single self. There is dual awareness. As a result, he goes through a fractured identity. This is also the case with other characters who are descendants of Kunta. They are attempting to carry out their African heritage along with trying to fit into

American society. This way they are divided into two selves which is what it means to have double consciousness.

So, Haley wants to show that African Americans care about their African heritage and are proud of their African identity but at the same time, they cannot just go on living with this identity only. Since, they are in American soil and since there is no alternative but to carry out their lives under dominant, influencing white culture, they have to establish their identity as being Americans too. Haley asserts that they are not living with African identity only. There really is twoness and they have to navigate their identity within these two identities. This process of finding one's identity in the midst of this is not simple as they have to undergo conflict and tension within. They have to be constantly aware of how others perceive their imposed identity and how they feel about themselves. Also, due to double consciousness, as the identity cannot be fixed to one, but it is rather evolving, African identity is not that simple as perceived which is only grounded in African roots; rather it has been redefined as something which encompasses duality, dynamism and is complex.

To sum up, Alex Haley's *Roots* has redefined African American identity. For doing so, it has challenged various stereotypes held against African Americans and presented them in a redefined way. Black consciousness focuses on celebrating black achievement and Haley has rightly showcased the academic achievements of African American characters. In doing so, *Roots* has countered the perception that they have low intelligence and no knack for education. Rather, it has shown that given equal opportunity as Whites, African Americans are also good in education. Similarly, *Roots* has redefined African Americans from being foolish and stupid to clever. Various tricks and tactics employed by black American characters to make their way to freedom prove their cunningness. Again, *Roots* aligns with the idea of black consciousness which emphasizes on acknowledging African culture and being proud of one's heritage. This breaks the stereotype that African Americans are barbaric and primitive with no culture and history. Rather, it shows them as people having unique

culture with historical and cultural depth, who deeply care about their culture. *Roots* also debunks the stereotype that they are submissive by showing their defiant nature. As the characters challenge the system by working towards their goal for freedom, it challenges the stereotype that they are only passive victims of slavery, rather show that they have agency of their own. Their traditional portrayal of mere objects has been shattered by showcasing their humanness. Also, their identity from lazy is proven wrong by showing them as hardworking people. They were identified with broken families but this has been challenged by displaying that they have wholesome and united family and the identity is redefined as multifaceted rather than homogeneous. Then, following the concept of double consciousness that is seen in the characters which causes dual awareness in African Americans, it can be said that their identity is not that simple as perceived. So, due to duality and conflict in their identity, their identity has been redefined as complex. It is complex in the sense that while navigating between two identities, they have to undergo conflict and they cannot simply pinpoint to their identity either to African only or American only.

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