

Identity Crisis in the Select Novels of Alex Haley

A. Rajeswari
Ph.D., Research Scholar
and
Dr. S. Ayyappa Raja
Assistant Professor of English
Department of English
Annamalai University
Annamalai Nagar – 608 002
rajeswari111@gmail.com
ayyapparaja.aueng@gmail.com
Cell: 9442444312
Cell: 9047788896

Abstract

Identity of a human being is an inseparable aspect from his or her life. It plays a major role in the life of people. Every human being has his or her own unique identity. Culture, tradition, customs and rituals which are followed and adopted by people differ from each other. In this 21st century, people have neglected their identity and started following others' (foreign or non-native) culture and tradition. The importance of their identity is being forgotten by people and they underestimate it. Alex Haley is one of the prominent Black Writers and his novels have talked about the importance of nativity, identity, culture and tradition of an individual. He was born in the year 1921, in Ithaca, New York to Simon Haley and Bertha George. Being an African American, he searched for his nativity, identity and family roots especially about his ancestors which he has depicted in his first two novels. He is a Pulitzer prize-winning African-American author and journalist.

In this paper, the researchers have taken Alex Haley's two novels to explain how he has dealt with the identity crisis in his works. *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* are the two vital novels of Alex Haley which evoked awareness among the people of 21st century about the importance of their nativity, family roots and identity. His constant search for identity, family roots, and love for native culture and tradition are reflected in the characters of his novels. His works are called as "Factions" because he has combined fact and fiction. He has portrayed his family's history in two of his novels namely *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* and *Queen: The Story of an American Family*. *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* is one of the landmark novels of Haley in which he has narrated his maternal family history. Kunta Kinte, the novel's protagonist and one of author's forefathers was a native African, who was enslaved and brought to America and sold in the market as a slave. He and his generations started living there losing their identity and lived as Black American. In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Haley has dealt with the quest for identity and the racial discrimination and violence that happened in the life history of Malcolm X. He is one of the great Black fighters who have constantly fought for the African American people. Born in a Black American Christian family, he has become a victim of the racial violence and segregation that prevailed in America. His quest for identity and knowledge about race and religion are presented in this novel.

Identity Crisis in the Select Novels of Alex Haley

Identity is a vital and an inevitable aspect in one's life. The quality, belief and characteristic of a person which make him stand out and unique from others. One's identity is

interrelated with the social set up of the place where he/she lives. Identity crisis arises when the society has multiple races and religions. Discrimination, suppression and domination appear when there are differences in race, religion, gender and economic status of people. The novels of Alex Haley have dealt with such major themes in them. Slavery, racism and identity crisis are importantly presented in his works. His works cover the history of slavery starting from the slavery era, Civil War period and post slavery period (From 15th century till the mid 19th century).

Alex Haley's debut work, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is about the life history of a great political activist and black freedom fighter Malcolm X. This work is a kind of biographical fiction. Malcolm X has narrated his whole life history to Alex Haley through a series of interviews. Alex Haley has written it in the form of a fiction and published it. It is all about Malcolm X starting from his birth till his death. It portrays the sufferings that Malcolm X and his family members faced because of racial discrimination and violence. The brutal treatment which he had in his life, made him an adherent supporter and fighter for the African American or Black American people. He fought for their rights and equality till his death. The main theme of this work is the quest for identity.

If the work is deeply analyzed, the readers can see Alex Haley's quest for identity is reflected very much. The image of Alex Haley could be seen in Malcolm X. Malcolm's quest for identity and his search for knowledge about the true philosophical meaning of life, race and religion are the important points of focus of this work. Writer Albert E. Stone in his essay

describes this work as “an illustration of the consequences as historical truth telling of two men’s collaboration” (Stone, 782).

Malcolm X was born in a Christian family, whose father Earl Little has faced racial violence and discrimination from his childhood. His family is shattered. His father Earl Little is a Black American from Georgia. His father is an adherent follower of Marcus Gravey’s ideals and thoughts and also a member of Gravey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) which supports and fights for the welfare of the African Americans. He is assassinated by the white people for spreading Gravey’s thoughts and Black Nationalism. Malcolm’s mother Louise Little is a fair skinned lady who has faced the cruelty of racial violence. She is sent to asylum by the white people and Malcolm and his sister are separated from her and taken care by white government welfare agency. He has protested and expressed his anguish for being separated from his family. He says:

“I truly believe that if ever a state social agency destroyed a family, it destroyed us. We wanted and tried to stay together. Our home didn’t have to be destroyed . . . And knowing that my mother in there [state welfare documents] was a statistics that didn’t have to be, that existed because of a society’s failure, hypocrisy, greed and lack of mercy and compassion. Hence, I have no mercy and compassion in me for a society that will crush people, and then penalize them for not being able to stand up under the weight” (AMX 22).

A series of transformations have taken place in him both physically and mentally. It is because of the racial violence that he has undergone makes him to neglect his last name which is kept by the white people. He has changed his last name as “X” which represents the lost name of his African

ancestors. This shows his determined thoughts that he had for his identity which includes his ancestry, nativity, culture and tradition of his native country Africa.

During his childhood, Malcolm has witnessed racial discrimination in his school. He is discouraged by his class teacher due to his black colour. So, he has discontinued his schooling. He has done various kinds of works after that. He has possessed anti-white views. He has referred to the white man as “the devil” (AMX, 162). His life at Boston is entirely different and he keeps “Detroit Red” as his nickname. His ambition is to become a lawyer but the racial discrimination acts as a barrier and stops him.

He has involved himself in burglary and is sent to jail. He has referred to himself as “Satan” when he entered into prison denoting his absolute rejection of any religious notions (AMX, 156). In jail, he is embraced by Elijah Mohammed who is the leader of Nation of Islam (NOI). He is educated and enriched by Elijah’s (NOI) ideals and thoughts. The phase in jail has brought change in his views about religion and race. He involves himself in NOI and spreads its philosophies and starts fighting for the welfare of the Black people like his father.

He becomes more famous than Elijah Mohammed. Like Marcus Gravey, he advocates Pan-Africanism (Unity of Africans). His increasing fame has expelled him from NOI. He could not believe that he is neglected and thrown away by another black man who has guided and educated him when he was in jail. He declares that Elijah, the leader of NOI has been a puppet of white people. He has talked about his expulsion in one of his speeches and has cynically exclaimed as follows:

It is a mirade that a nation of black people has so fervently continued to believe in a turn-the-other-cheek and heaven-for-you-die philosophy! It is a miracle that

the American black people have remained a peaceful people, while catching all the centuries of hell that they have caught, here in white man's heaven! The miracle is that the white man's puppet Negro 'leader,' his preachers and the educated Negroes laden with degrees, and other who have been allowed to wax fat off their black poor brothers, have been able to hold the black masses quiet until now. (AMX, 251)

There is a radical change in Malcolm's thoughts about race and religion after his spiritual journey to Mecca. His anti-White views are changed. In the pilgrimage, he has seen White people in the airport treating the Black people with respect. This incident has created a transformation in his thoughts and views. He has discovered himself and true salvation through the orthodox preaching of Islam. He converts himself into a Muslim and even changes his name as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. His name symbolizes his faith in International Islam. He exclaims about his transformation of his views on religion, race and his new identity:

In the past, yes, I have made sweeping indictments of all white people. I never will be guilty of that again – as I know now that some white people are truly sincere, that some truly are capable of being brotherly towards a black man. The true has shown me that a blanket indictment of all white people is as wrong as when whites make blanket indictments against blacks. (AMX 369)

Malcolm's search for true knowledge about race and religion lead him to self-discovery about his individuality and identity. He is happy with his new identity which he has adapted from his spiritual journey. The writer brings out the change in Malcolm: "In the pages of the autobiography of Malcolm X emerges as a fascinating and complex figure: immensely insightful

yet at times oddly naïve; often fearless but sometimes deeply vulnerable; apparently dogmatic and very sure of his beliefs yet surprisingly willing to learn, reassess, and change his views” (AMX, 247). Only at the end of his life, he gets the answer for his quest. His quest of his self-assertion in his society is ironically in itself “the utterance not of an ultimate identity but merely of the last one in the series of roles that Malcolm X had variously assumed, lived out of discarded” (AMX, 231).

J.E.Wideman says:

“Malcolm X’s story in essence is the struggle of the formerly enslaved, the colonized, the outcast, the dispossessed to seize responsibility, to forge personal identity and communal consciousness that will reverse centuries of subjugation, self-hate; a consciousness capable of opening doors through which healing, healthy people might walk unbowed” (Guzzio, 24).

The critic has brought out the Black consciousness of the protagonist here.

Alex Haley’s novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* was published in the year 1976 which chronicles his seven generations of his mother side family. All the characters of this novel are in constant search for their identity. Born as a Muslim in an African tribal village called Juffure, the lead character Kunta Kinte is captured and sold in the American market as a slave. He strictly follows his African Muslim tradition even after coming to America. He is given a Christian name called Toby and he is compelled not to utter his African name. On the contrary, he does not utter his new name and always mentions his African name. He is severely whipped for it and the White people have succeeded in breaking his determination:

. . . The black one began jabbing at his chest. "Me Samson!" he exclaimed. "Samson!" He moved his jabbing finger again to kunta. "You To-by! Toby. Massa say you name Toby!" when what he meant began to sink in, it took all of kunt's self-control to grip his flooding rage without any facial sign of the slightest understanding. He wanted to shout "I am Kunta Kinte, first son of Omoro, who is the son of the holy man Kairaba Kunta Kinte! (Roots, 214)

The pride that Kunta Kinte has when he uttered his father and forefather's name is evident through the above lines. It illustrates the importance that he has given to his identity.

The slaves are forcibly made to follow the Christian culture and tradition and they are not allowed to pray or practice their own religion and tradition. As a Mandinkan, Kunta Kinte could not resist himself following his own Mandinkan tradition. So he prays secretly in his cabin: "Kneeling towards the east, he prayed to Allah for deliverance, and just as he finished, the deep-throated baying came again, closer this time" (Roots, 208). "As the sun began to set, Kunta turned his face forward the east, and by the time he had finished his silent evening prayer to Allah" (Roots, 180).

The most painful element for Kunta is the frequent haunting of his own land, people especially their language, custom, tradition and culture which he and his ancestors have followed in Africa. Having the consciousness of an African, he could not live as an American. On the other hand, he is forced to live as a Black American and not as American. He would rather live as a slave not as an American. His tradition and culture are his real identity. Neglecting those original identities

and living with a fake identity, which includes their Christian name and Western culture enforced on them by their masters, stand as a big challenge for them.

The African Americans have adapted the non-native culture and tradition for their survival. At the same time, they could not forget their identity or culture and tradition. Even Kunta Kinte when he is about to get married to a slave named Bella, he is recalling the traditional way of marriage ceremony that used to take place in his own village. He is depressed that his marriage does not happen following the Mandinkan tradition. The writer says: "Kunta felt as if he was suffocating. In his mind was flashing how marriages were conducted in his Juffure. He could see the dancers hear the praise singers and the prayers, and the talking drums relaying the glad tidings to other village" (Roots, 325).

Unable to breathe in the white people society, he has tried to escape from the plantation for four times. All the four times, he gets caught and at the fourth time his front foot is cut down. His journey to retain his identity has made him to struggle a lot to get away from there: "Abandoning the idea of breaking the chain for now, anyway - he felt as if Allah had turned his back- but why? What thing so terrible had he ever done? It seemed to him that every time in his life when he had been punished, it had been because of carelessness and inattention" (Roots, 201).

He and the other slaves have started adapting themselves to the western culture. At the same time, consciousness about their identity could not be whipped off from their mind. Kunta Kinte takes up one step forward and he is determined to pass on his family's identity, ancestry and their Mandinkan language to his future generations. He teaches the Mandinkan tradition and culture to

his daughter Kizzy. His determination to pass on his family's root and heritage is clearly visible in the following lines:

Rolling along the dusty Spotsylvania country roads, he would tell her the Mandinkan names of things they passed along the road. Pointing at a tree, he'd say "yiro," then downward at the road, "silo." As they pass the grazing cow, he'd say "ninsemuso," and went over a small bridge, "salo." Once when they get caught in a sudden shower, Kunta Kinte shouted "sanjio," waving out at the rain, and when the sun reappeared, pointing at it, he said "tilo" (Roots, 375).

Not only Kunta Kinte but also his future generations too are also in constant search of their identity and have faced racial discrimination throughout their life even after getting freedom from the White people. From the analysis of the novels, the readers could understand the identity crisis of Black American people. Alex Haley has remarkably awakened the Blacks about their nativity, ancestral roots and their identity. It reveals obviously his Black Consciousness to the readers.

References

Primary Sources

Haley, Alexander. *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. Los Angeles: Vanguard Books, 1974. Print

----, Malcolm X. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1973. Print

----, Stevens Davis. *Queen: The Story of an American Family*. New York: William Marrow & Company, 1993. Print

Secondary Sources

Stone, E. Albert. "Collaboration in Contemporary American Autobiography," *Revue Francoise d' Etudes Americaines*, no.14, May 1982: 151-65. Print

Guzzio, Tracie Church. *All Stories are True: History, Myth and Trauma in the work of John Edgar Wideman*. Mississippi: UP of Mississippi, 2011. Print

Electronic Sources

Bio.True Story. <http://www.biography.com/people/alex-haley-39420>. 30 March 2015. Web