



Oral Narrative As A Mode Of Intergenerational Cultural Memory In Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga Of An American Family*

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Abstract:

Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, is highly regarded for its evocative depiction of slavery while also offering a rigorous examination of how cultural memory endures through oral cultural transmission, within a societal framework where people in bondage were barred from literacy and archival practices, and even their original names. Storytelling becomes evident as the primary vehicle for transmitting identity, heritage, and historical knowledge across generations. According to Haley, oral recounting is not a cultural practice that can be applied as a simple ritual in culture; rather, it serves as an important channel through which memory is transmitted. Pivotal to this process is the prime character of Kunta Kinte who was compelled to leave his homeland in Gambia and was given a new name by his enslavers. Kunta Kinte resolutely preserves his African heritage, remembering his parents, village customs, Mandinka language, and ancestral lineage. These memories are carefully preserved through oral transmission to his daughter, Kizzy. By recounting his history through spoken words, Kunta Kinte ensures that his identity remains alive through subsequent generations. As a result, oral narrative functions as an indispensable method for preserving both personal and cultural identity. This development does not happen without Kizzy, who dutifully listens to the stories told by her father and thereby passes them down to her son, Chicken George. The slave masters attempted to erase the African identity of culture by introducing new names, obstructing, and bifurcating families. However, oral tradition gives the characters a sense of connection to their origins, and their dignity. Every personal event in the story of Kunta Kinte makes them even more ethnic and proud of their ethnicity. *Roots* ascertains that cultural memory has the ability to become perpetuated through displacement and oppression when passed on through oral stories. Storytelling appears to be a powerful tool of family continuity, as history, who he was, and how cultural heritage will be transmitted to the next generations, no matter how the external forces are attempting to disseminate it.

I. KEY WORDS

1. Oral Narrative
2. Cultural Memory
3. Identity and Heritage
4. Intergenerational Transmission
5. Neo-Slave Narrative

6. Oral Tradition

7. Trauma and Memory

II. Concept of Oral Narrative and Cultural Memory

Oral narrative tradition is one of the leading techniques as it is significant to transmit stories, histories, values, and belief systems with the help of spoken words, rather than written documents. In prehistoric periods before the use of written documents and scripts, oral stories were the main medium through which cultures preserved their history and on how collectively the cultural information has been passed down. Cultural memory is something that can be understood as the shared entity of knowledge, experiences, and recollections that moulds identity as a society. Unlike an individual memory, which differs from person to person, cultural memory is collective in nature and maintained through repeated and continuous acts of narration, ritual, and performance. It enables the society as a whole to remember its origins, history, struggles, and achievements, and also fosters a sense of belonging and continuity. Oral stories are paramount in preserving the memory of our cultures, especially those that has great emphasis on the transmission and maintenance of history as conveyed through the spoken word rather than written documentation. Through storytelling and the ancient form of narratives, cultural memory maintains diversity and fluidity, changing with each successive generation while preserving its inherent aesthetic value. In *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, Alex Haley gives a lucid account of the role of oral narratives as a reservoir of cultural memory. The novel highlights the importance of the history taught orally and how it preserves the African heritage, particularly in the context of slavery, where written records of enslaved Africans were either missing or actively distorted. Haley terms oral narrative as a physical medium through which the kerygma of ancestry is perpetuated through time and space despite the constraints imposed by difficult realities. The memories of Africa—its customs, traditions, language, and lineage—are preserved not through official documentaries but through stories passed down within families in the form of speech, even under conditions of displacement, enslavement, and oppression.

III. Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma and Memory.

Intergenerational transmission of trauma and memory refers to the painful experiences and collective histories that are passed from one generation to the next. The sufferers are not limited to the direct victims of trauma, and it's emotional, psychological, and cultural consequences alone, rather, tend to be passed on to children and grandchildren. This transference is created when stories, silence, acting, family practices, or any other shared cultural stories are transmitted in the manner in which the subsequent generations perceive their identity and past. Memory plays a crucial role in this whole transmission process. The memories of sufferers are carried down by families and communities through oral traditions, rituals and daily discussions. Although the traumatic events might not be discussed overtly, it might take place indirectly through fear, anxiety, or the act of protection by the elders. Children grow up sensing these emotions and internalise them as part of their inherited experience. Historical events such as slavery, colonisation, war, displacement, and caste oppression demonstrate how trauma can become embedded in cultural memory. Descendants of those who endured such injustices often carry a sense of inherited pain alongside a strong awareness of resilience and survival. Such a phenomenon can often be demonstrated in literature, and in this context, an author frequently demonstrates how the characters receive not just narratives of the past, but also the emotional burden that has been connected to them. It retains power, sense of identity and opposition, and through the acts of recollection and narrative transmission, various communities translate traumatic events into the mechanisms of continuity and empowerment, without which the memory and recurrence of things may happen.

IV. Roots as a Neo-Slave Narrative

Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* can be exclusively read as a neo-slave narrative, a modern reworking of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century slave narrative tradition and oppression. It combines history and reconstruction, collective memory, along with oral testimony. Unlike other traditional slave narratives, which are authored by formerly enslaved individuals, *Roots*, on the other hand, emerges from a twentieth-century context in which slavery is remembered rather than directly projected or experienced. Yet Haley's text clearly adopts the structural, functional, and ideological concerns of the

slave narrative. It particularly emphasises origins, identity, resistance, and how they reclaimed the histories that were silenced through power and dominance.

One of the prominent features of the neo-slave narrative is how it holds onto the memory, both individually and collectively, as a historical source. In *Roots*, Haley strongly suggests that oral tradition is a legitimate and inseparable mode of remembering slavery. The narrative is set not merely as a fictional reconstruction but also as the compilation of generations of family storytelling, which is passed down orally before being given in written form. This is a delicate process which emphasis challenges on Eurocentric historiography, which adds advantage to oral testimony over written archival documents. By situating oral narrative as the heart of the text, *Roots* aligns itself with neo-slave narratives that seek to remedy the suppressed histories through alternative epistemologies.

Furthermore, *Roots* reworks the trajectories of the slave narrative beginning from capturing to enslavement and survival. By extending the traumatic experience across multiple generations, traditional slave narratives are often accumulative in freedom and literacy; *Roots*, however, contains narrative closure by tracing the psychological, cultural experiences and enduring genealogical consequences of slavery. This multigenerational structure reflects the neo-slave narratives within generations. This text explores the long-term effects of slavery, showing how the pain, memory, and knowledge are passed down long after the time of any protest. The suffering of Kunta Kinte does not end with his immediate physical subjugation, but passed onto his progeny and thus forms their group identities and their relationship with their past.

V. Conclusion:

Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* effectively substantiates on how oral recounting functions as a living source of intergenerational cultural memory. In the historical context in which African people held as captives and how they were systematically denied of literacy, documentation and even knowledge of their original designation, narrative tradition becomes the only reliable medium for the preservation of one's identity, heritage and antiquities. In Haley's storytelling, of course, the character of Kunta Kinte and his descendants offers an example of memory transmitted through spoken language and its ability to defy cultural erasure and to maintain a connection with African roots despite displacement and oppression. The novel also reveals how trauma and memory are transmitted across generations, shaping not only personal identity but also collective consciousness. The stories of suffering, resilience, and survival passed from Kunta Kinte to Kizzy and then to Chicken George show that oral tradition is not merely a cultural habit but a vital mechanism of continuity. *Roots*, like any neo-slave narrative, challenges the traditional historiography by validating oral testimony as an authoritative and valid source of historical information. Haley reconfigures the familial storytelling into a textual narrative, thereby mediating between oral memory and literary documentation. Ultimately, *Roots* affirms that as long as stories are kept alive and spread, cultural memory, identity, and dignity will survive through the generations despite the efforts to demolish by various external factors.

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