

Study on Generational Traumas in Roots

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Abstract: African American writer Alex Haley's *Roots* tells a story about the suffering of seven generations of his family in the context of race. The suffering experience has created the trauma of each generation. Although the experiences of each generation are different, they share a common theme of trauma, which is the resistance to slavery and racial oppression. The trauma of each generation has guiding significance for the next generation to face their own suffering. And the rebellious spirit of each generation in the face of trauma inspires the next generation. The inter-generational inheritance of trauma in the author's family makes the work an organic whole, which is one of the reasons why it has become a classic literature.

1. Introduction

Roots: The Saga of an American Family, written by the African American writer Alex Haley, is a group biography that tells the author's family story. It won the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize for literature in 1977. Group biography is a concept proposed by Yang Zhengrun in *A Modern Poetics of Biography* [8]. It refers to some biographies with the several characters as their successors. These successors have equal status in biographies, and there is no distinction between primary and secondary. They live in the same group, have contacts, and are related to their main experiences. This kind of biography is also called multi-biography. As a kind of biography, it embodies its historical value and shows truth, which has historical and literary research value for the trauma suffered by African American slaves under racism and slavery. Combined with the research status of literature at home and abroad, it can be seen that researchers' research on *Roots* can be divided into three dimensions: writing characteristics, theme and cultural research. Among them, the study of writing characteristics mainly focuses on nonfiction, narrative skills and so on; The theme research mainly focuses on slavery and root-seeking; Cultural studies mainly focus on the characteristics and values of ethnic culture. Although some scholars have paid attention to the writing of trauma in the book, few scholars have paid attention to the inter-generational communication of trauma in the work.

Trauma is closely intertwined with personal experience. Personal experience includes all aspects: education, frustration, growth and aging, etc. Trauma is closely related to the reconstructed past memory. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) occurs when faced with past memories of traumatic experience. Trauma can be taught and spread in groups with similar experiences. *Roots* records the story of seven generations. The first four generations have the typical personalities and their experiences are representative, while the last three generations' experiences are not detailed and untypical. The first four generations are Kunta, Kizzy, George and Tom. They all experience the

slavery but all have their own different experiences under the slavery. Their experiences cause different crises in their lives. And the memory always influences them. Moreover, there is the common trauma under slavery passing from one generation to one generation among this family. Through the oral narration of their family history from generation to generation, they convey the trauma suffered under racial prejudice through memory. This paper analyses the trauma experiences and injuries caused by trauma of these four generations, and how trauma can be transmitted between these generations.

2. Experiential Trauma

Trauma and experience are closely related. Psychic trauma involves intense personal suffering [2]. Kunta, Kizzy, George and Tom all experienced different crises in their life, which led to their traumas. Their experiences were different, but the underlying cause of their unfortunate experience was the same, that was, slavery.

Kunta's trauma was formed from the experiences of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in America. He was born in Gambia in 1750 in the days of the slave trade. In 17, he was captured by slave catchers and was sent to Colonial Virginia, and became a slave. In his life, trauma was shaped from crisis from outer environment. His experiences showed the value of "the history and ramifications of the Atlantic slave trade, New World slavery, and all of its more recent manifestations of oppressive control" [1].

In the Atlantic slave trade in the second half of 18th century, many Africans were transported from Africa to America and became the slaves doing hard work as donkeys. Kunta was one of them. He was caught at the time of searching for woods to make drum. He was ironed on the back and was inspected all the body, and was locked with other Africans nakedly. They were treated as animals on the ship, eating food in the bucket and sleeping in their excrement. These experiences made Kunta lose the faith of life at first, which was a big crisis, compared with his life before. This crisis led to the trauma, which would influence him forever. The experiences under the slavery in America also led to his body-trauma. After the several months' traveling on the ship, Kunta arrived at Virginia, and was auctioned publicly. He was bought by slave owner, and worked at two farms. During this process, he fled for four times. Kunta was brutally punished every time. The first escape took place on the way back to the slave owner's house after Kunta was bought by the white slave owner. Kunta was captured by slave helper with the help of hounds and was mercilessly flogged. After this escape, Kunta was shackled with both hands and feet, and was driven to the fields to harvest corn. Here Kunta saw the obedience of other slaves. White overseers, black assistants and low-level serfs formed a hierarchical monitoring system [4]. Under such surveillance, the serfs worked hard. Black assistants act as "relay stations" [4] for discipline and surveillance. Kunta found that the serfs did not know who they were or where they came from. They lost themselves under the discipline, and even thought that blacks and whites needed each other. In the power relationship, the two sides of power coexist with each other, that is, slaves can live and work normally under the slavery of white people, but once they leave the supervision of white people, they may fall into self-doubt. This is the result of the domestication of the behaviour and thought of the black people by the white people under the racist ideology. In the process of working, Kunta looked for weapons to prepare for the next escape. When Kunta's ankle was "festered with long-term shackles" [6], the white supervisor let the slave steward untie the shackles. This gave Kunta another chance to escape. However, due to the foot injury, Kunta was once again captured by the slave steward and severely beaten. The third escape was better prepared than the first two. Kunta found "a thick iron wedge" [6] and "a knife and ran away in the snowy night" [6], but was caught up by his footprints. This time, Kunta stabbed a hound and tried to run away, but the hunted man shot him in the leg with a gun and was flogged. In the fourth escape, Kunta made a knife by himself, prepared dried rabbit meat as food, and fled through a carriage

carrying tobacco leaves. But the slave hunter, with the help of the hounds, chased Kunta again. This time he fought hard, but was not only shot, but also tied to a tree in public. The white slave hunter “cut his front half of right foot” [6].

From being caught to becoming a slave in America, Kunta was hurt by the cruel reality. White racists suppressed slaves. These experiences showed all the African Americans’ ancestors who got through the Atlantic slave trade and worked in the field. This was undoubtedly the reason why Kunta and others, like him, had trauma.

Kizzy was the daughter of Kunta and Bell. She was born in 1790. At this time, the country has just been established. Different from her father, her trauma was shaped from the education and crisis from outer environment. She was sold from Virginia to North Carolina.

Kizzy’s trauma was closely related to her experiences, especially in education and life. Kizzy was born after the founding of the United States and was well protected by her father Kunta and her mother Bell. Other slaves had to do hard work on the farm, while Kizzy only had to help her mother with some chores in the kitchen. She got on well with her master’s niece. The little white girl taught her how to read and write. At that time, the law stipulated that slaves could not learn to read and write. But the white children thought it was fun that they would pretend to be teachers and teach slave children to read and write. If they were found, they would be sold by their masters to the deeper south. After Kizzy learned to read, she was not satisfied with the previous slave life. She helped Noah, the male partner in the farm, escape [6]. Finally, after being discovered, she was sold to “Caswell County in North Carolina” [6]. Thus, Kizzy started a miserable life. Kizzy was raped by the owner Tom Lea and gave birth to a son. The slave life in the plantation in the south was different from that in the north. The slave life was more difficult. They did more physical work. Kizzy did the work of both field and house. Another thing to mention was that Kizzy had never told anyone that she could read since he was sold to a new farm in the south. To the end, her offspring were sold to other plantations, and she died alone on the farm.

Kizzy’s experiences contributed to the formation of her trauma. She witnessed the current situation of slavery in the south and the north at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century. Her experiences undoubtedly had a great impact on her trauma.

George, born in 1806, was the son of Kizzy and white slave owner Tom Lea. He was a mulatto. The Atlantic slave trade was abolished in 1808 in America but the domestic slave trade developed [7]. He was the first one in his family who got freedom during the slavery.

As a mulatto, George’s experiences played an important role in the formation of his trauma. Since his birth, George had been loved by farm slaves as the only child on the farm. His white father had no children, and the clever George was concerned by his master. At the same time, many white people in the south engaged in cockfighting, whether rich planters or poor white people. Even many poor white people made a fortune by cockfighting, and George’s master and father was one of them. With a cockfight at the beginning, he gradually won the land and established his own farm. George showed great talent in cockfighting, so he was trained to fight cocks. When he learned that he was the master’s son, he felt that the master would treat him differently from other slaves. So, he always ignored his mother’s advice and looked forward to his master. But the reality was that the owner never regarded him as his own son, but always regarded him as his own property. Therefore, when he saw through all this, his heart was hurt. In the first half of the 19th century, because slaves in the south could not stand the oppression of slave owners, black people continued to organize to resist, including the famous Nat Turner’s Insurrection in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831[5]. When experiencing this situation, the white owner pointed a gun at George because he was afraid of the rebellion of black slaves. Even “niggers caught talkin’ ‘bout revolt made to dance on hot embers ‘til dey falls.” [6] It was the first time George realized that his master did not treat him as a son. The second time was in a large-scale cockfighting competition, the owner put all his possessions on, but lost in the end. The

owner's initial promise to give George and his mother, wife and children freedom if they won came to naught. George also gave George as goods to others because the owner could not bear all the debts. In this "betrayal" of the master, George thoroughly saw the difference between black and white, and no longer had illusions about the master.

As a mulatto, George experienced something different from his mother Kizzy. However, he did not recognize his identity and position as a slave from the very beginning. He was full of expectations for the white father, but his real experience hit him, resulting in trauma.

Tom, born in 1833, was the son of George and Matilda. He experienced the civil war, and witnessed the abolishing of slavery. Moreover, he led his family to the success, which provided African Americans with a kind of way to deal with the situation they met. His trauma was formed from his experiences in slavery.

Tom's trauma was mainly caused by his experiences in slavery. Unlike his father George, he knew his disadvantage as a black man and was careful in his work. Tom still suffered some great crises in the racial environment, which caused harmful trauma to him. Before the civil war, when Tom and his father George went to the shop, they met the white sheriff. The sheriff humiliated his father and him. And during the civil war, the sheriff became the Major of the southern army. He asked Tom to go to the army to shoe the horses. But in the army, Tom was wrongly accused of stealing as a black man. The sheriff's "face contorted, raising the braided whip, he brought it down lashing like the fire across Tom's shoulders, again, again..." [6] Even after the civil war ended and slavery was abolished, the sheriff still insisted on the prejudice of southern slave owners and humiliated Tom. His trauma was inseparable from the racial discrimination and prejudice he suffered in slavery. These experiences had shaped Tom's unique character. He is mature and steady. He experienced slavery and witnessed the end of slavery.

All four of them experienced different crises, resulting in mental trauma. It could be seen that the formation of trauma under slavery was closely related to the racial oppression experienced by slaves.

3. Forgeable Trauma

Trauma is related to the memory in the past. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is closed to this part. It refers to mental disorders that occur and persist after individuals experience, witness or encounter one or more actual deaths involving themselves or others, or are threatened by death, or serious injuries, or physical integrity is threatened. "The overwhelming events of the past repeatedly possess, in intrusive images and thoughts, the one who has lived through them. [2]" Kunta, Kizzy, George and Tom are all suffering in the memory of traumatic experiences.

Kunta's memory about the past gave him a chance to deal with trauma. In the process of looking back to the memory, we could know the formation of his trauma. Kunta showed the PTSD because of his experiences and the symptom of it influenced his normal life.

After Kunta came to America through the slave trade, his experiences on ships haunted his mind. This memory of the past had a great impact on his later behaviours. He thought he would never return to Africa and never see his parents again. The description of this traumatic experience kept coming to his mind, and he would also like to find someone to talk about it. But the other slaves on the farm would not listen to him, because the slave owners forbade them to gather together and tell anything about Africa and slavery. If they were found talking together, they would be regarded as plotting a rebellion. But when Kunta's inner injury couldn't be relieved, it would hurt his psychology. In addition to this experience during the slave transportation, Kunta's escape experience after being sold to the farm also had a traumatic sequence on his life. In his escape experience, his body was tortured cruelly. The most serious one was that half of his feet were cut off when he "was screaming and thrashing as the ax flashed up, then down so fast-severing skin, tendons, muscles, bone-that Kunta

heard the ax thud into the trunk” [6]. Since then, Kunta’s psychology began to collapse, and he thought he had become a disabled man. In addition, he was spiritually afraid of the white people and did not dare to show any rebellious behaviour.

Although the wounds had been lingering, Kunta didn’t avoid facing the past memory of slavery, and he bravely handled with it. Furthermore, the past memory about the bad experiences helped him to build himself.

Kizzy, as an African American woman, lived a hard life. Her experiences caused her trauma, and she even chose to refuse to mention what she experienced. Because the past memory was harsh and she knew that she could do nothing about that.

Since Kizzy was sold to the south because her master found her literate, she had never confessed to anyone that she could read. It was because she helped other slave escape and drew a map and a traveling pass that she was forced to separate from her parents. This painful memory was repeated in her mind after she came to the new farm. This kind of memory would burst out when it could not be resolved later. When a female slave who knew witchcraft told Kizzy’s fortune and mentioned that she would never see her parents again, “Kizzy continued to scream, bolting outside and across into her own cabin and slamming her door” with “her face tear-streaked and contorted” [6]. Kizzy’s experience of being raped by her white master to give birth to George had also been torturing her. The other slaves on the farm knew that George was master’s child, but no one dared to mention it. Kizzy also kept silent about this matter, but the pain caused by the white owner made her no longer as radical as before when she was with her parents. She chose to abandon herself. At night, she let her owner vent his desire on her body, and she worked numbly in the fields during the day. She lived like this on the farm until she died.

Kizzy’s memory of the past had always been associated with her life. She chose to escape from reality and could not bear the pain of the past. Once these memories were mentioned, she would lose control. But her strong character always supported her to face life.

Compared with the rest of the family, George’s life experience was relatively flat. He did not suffer particularly serious physical devastation, and his life was relatively stable. But his memory of the relationship between father and son always influenced him.

During the period of slavery, many white slave owners raped their black female slaves and had mulatto children. But they did not regard them as human beings or children, but as their own property, and they would flog and sell them at will. When George knew that the master was his father, he thought that the master would be very kind to him. However, the master only treated him as a slave. During the slave uprising, he saw that he was not important to his master, who could point a gun at him. Then, after the biggest cockfight, when the master offset him to the creditor, George completely saw the hypocrisy of master. His expectation of his master as a father was completely shattered. Whenever he thought of this traumatic experience, he would feel distressed about his racial identity.

Although George’s experience had not left a deep physical trace, the sense of his own identity had undergone a process of transformation. In the process, the harm caused by racial differences undoubtedly tortured him in his later life. However, it should be pointed out that in the end, he gained freedom through his own efforts.

Tom’s character was mature and steady. He learned a lot of ways to get along with white people from the slavery period. However, it should be noted that his past experience of racial discrimination and oppression had had an inevitable impact on his life.

Tom’s deepest memory of racial prejudice was about the sheriff’s attitude towards him. The sheriff was insulting to Tom before, during and after the civil war. In fact, the sheriff represented the attitude of most of the southern slavery supporters in the mid-19th century. The sheriff constantly reminded Tom of his status as a slave by virtue of his racial advantage. Even after the abolition of slavery, Tom was humiliated by the sheriff. The resulting traumatic memory was very strong. Therefore, this kind

of memory of the past would undoubtedly produce traumatic sequence. However, Tom finally achieved economic success through his own efforts, and recognized his own identity and became more confident.

In short, the unfortunate experiences in the past would have a significant impact on the characters' lives. Some people choose to face the past, while others choose to escape. Facing the past can be painful, but it can resolve the trauma; while escape will only make people more painful. Kunta, Kizzy, George and Tom all had the pain to face and escape from the traumatic experience, but they had finally overcome these wounds with their own efforts.

4. Teachable Trauma

Trauma is trans-missive and educational. One person's traumatic experience can teach another person how to face and deal with the same problem. In the book, the stories of the previous generation undoubtedly have the guiding significance for the next generation. Furthermore, it should be noted that their common trauma is racial discrimination and oppression under slavery. The four generations of Kunta, Kizzy, George and Tom family have adhered to handed down the family history by word of mouth. In the family history, there are deeds of ancestors who bravely faced slavery. This kind of traumatic inheritance is a valuable asset for the whole family.

Kunta was Kizzy's father, and his experiences had certain reference significance for her. Kizzy learned some African traditions from Kunta and knew her father's experience from Africa to America. What she learned from him was helpful for her to deal with reality and sooth her traumatic pain.

Kunta told her daughter about her experience of being trafficked from Africa to America when she was a child. He told his young daughter about his suffering on the ship, and Kizzy could not understand why the white people did so. When she was a child, Kunta had been teaching her some self-defence skills that only boys could learn. She really began to understand that her father suffered when she was found literate and sold by his master. Kunta and Bell screamed bitterly. She also tried hard to ask for help from them, but nothing helped. She deeply understood the lowliness of her identity under slavery, and her destiny was not in her own hands. After being sold to the south, Kizzy always remembered her father's teachings. After giving birth to the child, she welcomed the birth of the child in the African way her father gave her by saying, "Behold-the only thing greater than yourself" [6]. She would tell Kunta's story to her child when he could remember.

The experience of our predecessors was a valuable asset for future generations. Kunta's experience was passed on to his daughter Kizzy through his dictation. His performance in suffering had given Kizzy the courage to face difficulties, so that he could get some spiritual comfort in the face of racial trauma.

Kizzy was George's mother. She told George the story of her father and asked George to tell them Kunta and her own story when he had children. Her suffering at the southern farm also gave George a kind of courage and perseverance to face difficulties.

At first, George could not understand his mother's experience. He thought he was the master's son, and the master would not treat himself as other whites treated slaves. But George ignored his own black blood, and did not know that his mother was right until he was beaten by reality. Then, when he knew the truth that master only saw him as a slave, he began to save money to buy freedom for himself and his family. And he also obeyed his mother's words. Every time his child was born, he would gather the whole family to tell them the story of his grandfather Kunta, which had become a family tradition in the future.

Kizzy insisted on telling George a story of her father from Africa because it was a fact that her family members must remember. This was of great significance to the family's connection and helped them remember the racial trauma they had suffered.

Tom was the fourth son of George. Compared with George's other children, he was George's only promising child who had his own business. He led his family to success after the abolition of slavery. Unlike George, he was not so rash, but careful and able to take the overall situation into account. So, he shouldered the responsibility of taking care of his family.

George played both positive and negative roles for Tom. Under the arrangement of his father, he learned to shoe horses and became a blacksmith. He could earn as much money as his father. During the conversation with Tom, George told him that he planned to save money to redeem the freedom of the whole family. So, the two worked together towards this idea. When George left the family, Tom took the responsibility of family leader, took care of his family and dealt with all kinds of things. On the contrary, George's arrogance led to his exile, which played an important role in the formation of Tom's cautious character. George had always been full of illusions about his father as his master. Only when his master gave him to others to pay off debts did he realize that his racial identity would never be recognized by his master. This experience made Tom more clearly understand his own situation, and he could take appropriate measures to deal with the oppression from the white people.

Of course, George also told Tom the story of his grandfather Kunta. This story has become a legendary story that inspires every generation of family members. George, as a father, played an important role in Tom's growth. And the memory of racial trauma had also been passed down between the two people.

5. Conclusion

As a group biography, *Roots* describes the life experiences of seven generations of the author's family, and most of these experiences are based on facts. It not only reflects the history of the United States from the colonial period in the second half of the 18th century to the first half of the 20th century before World War II, but also shows the suffering of African Americans in the racial sense. Haley has a certain ideological interest in securing for his text the benefits of fictional extrapolation and historical corroboration, since he wishes to chastise the nation for the racial chauvinism of the past [3]. "When we hold *Roots* up to the American past, present and future for its influence and endurance, it will remain difficult to behold anything greater." [1]

In *Roots*, the traumatic experiences of the seven generations have their own characteristics, and their individual experiences and reactions are different. However, the trauma caused by their suffering under slavery and racial discrimination is continuous and comes down in one continuous line, that is, it is a kind of trauma inherited from generation to generation. The traumatic experience of the previous generation provides spiritual guidance for the next generation. This is the reason why *Roots* can make the different experiences of seven generations into an organic whole, and this is one of the reasons why *Roots*, as a family biography, has become a classic.

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