

A Comprehensive Study of the Analysis of Figurative Language in Alex Haley's " Roots"

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Abstract

This study is distinctively restricted to the analysis of the figurative language that is very important in any literary text and it distinguishes a writer from the others and clothes him with high degree of identity. The study aims to analyze the manner in which style is used in Alex Haley's Novel *Roots*. The analysis was intended to investigate some significant rhetorical devices such as (metaphor, symbol, and simile) in Haley's *Roots*, and to show how these figures of speech enable Haley to convey his message to the readers. It is divided into eight sections, each analyzing a topic. Finally, the study has reached some conclusions that verify the hypothesis of the study.

Key Words Alex Haley, *Roots*, Metaphor, Symbol and Simile

I. Introduction

Literature is both the foundation of human knowledge and the record of human experience. African American literature is a kind of literature that is written by a group of people who came from Africa to settle in America. Then it is accepted to be an important aspect of American literature, especially with writers and works as "*Roots*" that presents the current stories of the blacks in American society. This novel is written by Alex Haley that deals with the past events of the enslavement to his own present life. However, this literary text strongly explains the relationship between generations and races. In 1977, Haley won special Pulitzer prize for his novel "*Roots*".

Roots was written by Alex Haley as a family history novel that is based on genealogical research that reaches back to the moment of enslavement in Gambia in the eighteenth-century. This saga became a sensation to make Haley as a best-selling African American author in history. (Miller, 2016: 134)

Haley's *Roots* (1976) tells the saga of the slave knowledge as part of the overall course of his American family. (Graham, 2004: 95) Alex Haley's *Roots* is both a family story and collective events.

<http://www.Roots> the book.Com.n.dweb explains that *Roots* encouraged much concern in family history and Haley created the "Kinta foundation" in 1972, to keep records that help in following black genealogy. Although, "*Roots*" has many issues to handle, the researcher will concentrate on its style because style is very crucial to any work of literature, the aura of uniqueness and distinction that distinguishes a writer from the others and clothes him with high degree of individuality. Moreover, style is the manner of linguistic expression in prose or poetry. On the other hand, the characteristic style of a writer or work may be analyzed in terms of its figurative language and rhetorical devices.

II. Haley's life

Alexander Murray Palmer was born in New York on August 11th 1921. Because of his father was a skillful student at university, his mother preferred to stay with her parents to be secluded from her husband. Haley's grandmother (Cynthia) played an active role in his life. She was an animated storyteller, and entertained Haley and his two younger brothers with tales of their ancestors and the African village where their family had originated. After that, these tales had become the source and inspiration for Haley's later works. His father, Simon Haley, began as a professor in Alabama College while his mother died suddenly.

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Haley was a gifted student but unfortunately he left his college to get a new job as a writer of short stories. Then he began to devote more time to his writing and eventually the stories were published in a small magazine and journals. He remained more than twenty years as a chief journalist in the Coast Guard. He started writing his first stories such as " They Drive you Crazy", " The Autobiography of Malcolm", " Mama Flora's family", and " Roots". (Shirley, 2005:22)

"Roots" (1976) generates a great interest in the history and legacy of racism and slavery. (Andrews, Foster, and Harris, 2001: 183)

III. Overview of Roots

" Roots" has many reviews and controversy. For example, Chavis (1983, 311-324) describes that Roots represents a pan- African racial boast which implies a better future for a negro which involves not only a new social situation such as health, jobs, housing and education but also another moral and spiritual atmosphere of respect for the most sensitive elements of the Negro personality such as religion, culture, history and the true identity. Chavis continues that Haley wanted a due place for the black American, therefore Haley searched for a valid culture and civilization of the Africa, through his novel Roots.

On the other hand, there is another review of Roots which concentrates on the value of racial pride which is carried by Levi (1977:367) views Roots as a gift to African American, which restores their heritage. Roots helped to bring issue of race and slavery into the national consciousness. Thus, the book has helped white Americans to understand the terror of slavery. It is worth mentioning that not all the reviews of Roots were positive. Clare (2008: 235) views that Roots never claimed to be the whole truth. Haley called it ' faction', faction based upon fact. Haley claimed that he had revealed his family's genealogy, but actually the genealogist claimed that Haley had interlaced fictional sense- e.g. that the characters said and other information from history around his family so as to produce a realistic narrative story. However, it is now accepted that not only were the ' story' elements ' fiction', but that the ' facts' on which Haley created his story were also not true- e.g. that the whole story was fiction from beginning to end.

On the other hand, Norrell (2015:213) considers that Roots suggests how each of the readers are vehicle of the history which has produced them. As a matter of fact, Roots worked as a watershed in the history of how slavery has been described in American Culture.

IV. Haley 's Style

The term style as defined by Raj (1992:162) is a distinctive way of writing in prose or verse used by a certain writer that distinguishes him/ her from other writers. To analyze and assess the style of any work of art, it is advisable to examine the writer's way of using the language, concerning different aspects such as figurative language, figures of speech or rhetorical devices and others. Moreover, the writer's style is expressed by his/ her diction, imagery, devices and so on. These literary devices are important elements to explain the ideas of the writer. Haley is described as a father of Africa; therefore most of Haley's novels take two settings (Africa and America). Generally speaking, most of Haley's themes in his novels are slavery, identity and heritage. So, Haley's novels are full of metaphors and symbols which are important to make the novels more interesting and vital. On the other hand, Haley is a grand master of story teller; Haley crafts each scene to come alive for the readers. He used to apply the technique of the third person narrator which enables Haley to narrate the past events and represent them alive for his readers. Hence, the readers can deeply understand the life in Africa with the life in America, life free with life enslave, living as Muslim with living among Christians. In Roots, Kunta as a hero of this play, could do nothing than scream:

*" He shouted so hard that he had no voice left,
so his mind screamed it instead: " kill toubob- and
their traitor black helpers! (Roots, p. 202)*

V. Figurative Language

Figurative language, figures of speech or imagery is the use of language in a non-literal way. It is a utilitarian element that helps to understand and appreciate the literary texts as Janeczko (2011: ix) states that " imagery is a perfect doorway into their appreciation". <http://grammar.yourdictionary.com> points that a

rhetorical device is any manner of saying something other than the conventional way, such as simile, which is a comparison used to catch the reader's attentions and depict something in descriptive terms. For example, "The woman is like a red rose" or "The lady's face is as a moon". Metaphor is related to a simile but does not use the words "like" or "as" as in a simile. For instance, "That man is a fox" is a metaphor. Abrams (2009:304) defines the term "symbol" as a word or a phrase that means an object or an event which means something, or proposes a range of reference, beyond itself. Most of the composers are overwhelmed by the idea that the literary texts should enrich human's life with various types of experiences good or bad, nevertheless, the element of beauty is still standing. It occurs whomever a speaker or writer, for the sake of freshness or emphasis, decides to flee away from the usual denotations of words. The various rhetorical uses of language are considered as figuratives. They employ words in figurative way. (Hirsch, 2014: 266). Though, in the following sections the most common elements will be mentioned.

VI. Metaphor

The term metaphor is derived from the Greek verb *metapherein* which means "to transfer" (Glucksberg, 2001:3). Thus, metaphor transfers meaning from one word to another working on the basics of connecting different experiences to one another. Roots is full of metaphors although it is based on facts. Metaphors are important to make the novel more interesting and lively. There are some examples of metaphor such as :

"But amid all the lushness of nature, and sickness
spread steadily among the people of Juffure". (p, 16)

in this quotation. Haley represents nature as human being who is cruel and evil. Another example of metaphor is :

"Kunta felt, almost as if it were a smell, the fear of his mates
Behind him in the line". (p, 121)

In this quotation, Haley stands for fear as man who has a smell. In addition, there is another example of metaphor as in :

"one day during arrest period, when the boy was testing his bow
and careless arrow happened to attack a nest of Kurburungo
bees high in a tree, a cloud of angry bees swarmed down". (p,129)

In this quotation, Haley represents a group of bees as a man the cloud. It is worth mentioning that, the first of the two main settings is the African village that includes the huts and farms.

The African law is based on their religion and ancestor's rules. It is worth mentioning that, the village reflects a sense of strict moral values and disciplinary measures in accordance with the Islamic religion. Therefore, the village stands for lawfulness and purity, which stands as a contrast to American life that occurs later. The treatment of whites toward blacks are described as humiliating. Whites treated blacks like animals rather than human beings.

"I am simply trapped like a leopard in a trap, he thought". (p, 196)

In this quotation, Haley shows that whites trapped blacks like animals savagely and chain them like criminals who are waiting their death:

"Finding himself gagged, blind folded, and bound with his wrists
behind him and his ankles with tied rope". (p, 197)

VII. Symbol

The term symbol can be explained by Skipp (1992: 136) as an image that represents or stands for something in addition to its literal meaning. A symbol may be an item, a creature, a state, an action, an expression or an idea that has precise meaning in the story as well as a substitute identity that symbolizes something else. It is used as an expressive way to describe an idea. The symbol generally bears an expressive response far beyond what the word, idea, or image itself designates. e.g. A pen stands for Knowledge.

In this novel, Kunta as a main character, could do nothing than scream. In this action, Haley states that this shout symbolizes all that is left to Kunta to do so as to bring back his honour and pride which they were taken off by the toubob when they were kidnapping him and treating him like an animal or worse. The scream and shout became a kind of release of the inner sorrow when there is no language could help to express:

" he wanted to show himself away from that empty space, but
the instant he moved, the raking of his visible muscles against
the bounds made him scream in agonyToubob fa! he screamed
into the stinky darkness, his cuffed hand jangling the chain of the
wolof's empty cuff". (p, 234)

It was a scream of wanted freedom and friend's lost. Between cries, he cried out things he could scarcely consider he was uttering:

"Omore- Omar the Second Caliph, third after Muhammad the
Prophet!". (p, 236)

This scream can tell the readers how Kunta was depressed when he felt he would die in a strange place.

Another scream was when one black tried to make him understand that his name became Toby; so:

" He wanted to shout" I am Kunta Kinte, first son of Omoro,
Omoro, who is the son of the holy man Kairaba Kunta Kinta!" (p, 269)

As a way to prove his personal identity symbolized in his name and race. All these struggles make him remember his family and ancestors: Omoro, Binta, Lamin, Suawadu, and Madi.

it is a symbol of remembrance and Kunta wan not forgetting them, they were the stone that would not more from his heart and mind. The drum symbolizes the only thing that could help to restore the history. It symbolizes the link between the family and its history in Africa. The cut of Kunta's right leg symbolizes the

last hope to have the same life as before. It symbolizes the edge between past life, which was full of vitality, happiness and strength, and the new life which is full of despair, weakness and hopelessness. The humiliation was not directed just to him, but extended to his daughter (Kizzy) that the master asked Bell to arrange a bed for her daughter on the base of master's daughter bed. This symbolizes the inferiority of blacks. Besides this, the master's daughter acted as if Kizzy is her doll, whenever she wanted Kizzy the master's daughter take Kizzy from her parents and play with her even if it was Kizzy's birthday which her parents want to celebrate with their daughter in their own way. Moreover, *Roots* the title of Haley's book has a symbolic meaning. Roots are the creative concept of the underground. Not only because they are the term that signifies underground, but also because they represent the human connections to history and genealogy. Roots are plainly underground and figuratively emblemative of an individual's connection to his/ her history and culture. " Roots" has another meaning that each generation helps to liberate. For example, Kunta Kinta proves a particularly valuable ancestor, who survives slavery without losing his African identity; therefore the name of Kunta Kinte has turned into an example of self-determination, because his ability to keep memories from his home-land and the family's original name is the central vehicle for self- determination and for a symbol of racial pride. Moreover, an " imagined family", which historically coincides with Haley's family tree is also symbolically accommodated the African American society as a whole. Haley wants to show that his own ancestors would be a symbolic story of all African – descent people. Roots can refer both to Kunta and his descent dents origins in Africa as well as their brawl to create out a place for themselves in America. In terms of Africa, Roots symbolize an ancestral homeland. On the other hand, in terms of united states, Haley's family reflect a healing, since Alex Haley is able to go back to his town and repair what was torn long ago in his family tree. In America, Roots show that despite their unlucky beginnings. Haley's mother's family was able to stick together and form a new home.

VIII. Simile

The simile that describes the remembrance between two dissimilar things with the use of " like" and "as". (Sommer, 2013: ix) Simile is a direct , explicit composition of one thing to another, usually uses the words such as "like", "as", "than" to show the connection between the two things.

Simile is important in *Roots* because it serves the message that Haley wants to convey to the readers which is racist act of African people in slavery period. Whites treated blacks like animals rather than human beings.

' I'm simply trapped like a leopard in a snare, he thought". (p, 196)

Even when whites want to buy a slave, they examine him/ her as the blacks are like animals.

" Is it quick as horse'. (p, 250)

In addition, when whites are selling blacks, they describe blacks as animals such as

" works like a mule" or " Bright as monkeys". (p, 249-250)

Another example of simile, when Haley describes the old grandmother who told the children the stories, that her face has

" deeply wrinkled as black as the bottom of a cooking pot". (p, 17)

In this quotation, Haley shows that the grandmother was very old. Besides that, Haley reflects the importance of oral narration through the old grandmother which preserved the history, culture and heritage. In addition, there is an example of simile, when the rain fall and every things in justice are green even the mud of the land:

" the mud underfoot was newly as carpeted
each morning with bright colored petals ". (p, 16)

Another example of simile:

"the green fruits were as hard as rock". (p, 17)

In this quotation, Haley views that the fruits are not ripe enough to eat and the people of Juffure who eat the fruits will feel ill and vomit. Also, there is a simile in :

" they lie on their Sides like spoons in a drawer". (p, 906).

In this quotation, Haley describes the situation of slaves in the ship which is carried slaves to America , that their conditions are very bad.

IX. Conclusion

The analysis of the figurative language gives an easy and comprehensive understanding for the readers because the style conveys the writer's message to the readers. Haley uses the language of black African American, particularly slaves' conversation to illustrate the meaning of identity, that the black Americans have their own distinguished language and Haley succeeds in using rhetorical devices which help him to clarify the details of African life and American society. So the hypothesis of this study is accepted.

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