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The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

The venom of racism has had its roots in all parts of our society all these years and it still keeps poisoning several parts of society. People know very less about the struggles, ventures, and feats of Blacks as they are not as highlighted as whites. This paper is the essay review of Rebecca Skloot’s *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks.* Rebecca Skloot, a journalist, narrates the learning about Henrietta Lacks, an African American woman who died of cervical cancer in 1951, but her cancerous cells were used to create the very first immortal cell line of human, named as HeLa. Skloot discusses that HeLa made it possible for a few of the most significant discoveries in the 21st century, but the world knows very little about the woman who was behind them. Skloot then introduces the daughter of Henrietta, Deborah Lacks, who is the key figure in quest of Skloot.

Skloot narrates visits of Henrietta to Johns Hopkins Hospital. Doctors first tell Henrietta that she is fine and there is nothing that wrong with her, but out of the blue, she is diagnosed with cervical cancer by them and they start her treatment with radium and x-ray therapy. The author describes that Johns Hopkins hospital was among the finest hospitals of the country, but then she shows the darker side that this hospital was committed to intensely racist practices when they have African Americans as their patients. Skloot then traces lineage back of Henrietta to the Clover’s town, VA, describing how Henrietta and her husband met. Both husband and wife first had a mentally impaired daughter named Elsie, she died eventually in an asylum known as Crownsville (Skloot).

The true power of Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* is that it is not only confined to a simple celebration of scientific discoveries. There are various books and countless articles that have been written regarding the HeLa cell line before, but all of them have mainly ignored the woman behind this discovery and did not discuss much Henrietta and her family. The story of this poor African American woman whose cells were taken from her body without her consent or knowledge was simply not addressed by most of the writers. Moreover, nobody even knew about her real name for decades (Zielinski, Sarah). Skloot’s work here discusses how cancerous cells of one woman were multiplied and distributed all around the world and entered this world into the era of latest cellular research and powering astonishing advancements in technology, medical treatments, and scientific methodology. Discovery of these cells has been remarkably productive and has become assimilated into science’s advancements across the globe (pharmaceutical treatments, genome research, polio vaccination, space travel, etc.). But the attitudes of scientists and journalists made it bitter for Henrietta's family to a greater extent about the whole matter. Furthermore, from Henrietta's cells, many medical companies made millions where Henrietta's family remained poor throughout and were barely able to afford their health insurances even in best of their times (Nisbet, Matthew, Fahy). Her cells got famous and famous, but Henrietta's family knew nothing about what happened to Henrietta and what was taken from her. Skloot’s work here has done what other authors couldn’t, unlike any other scientific story about HeLa, she has illumed the real story behind all of it and revealed the bitter side that Henrietta and her family experienced because of the ugliness of racial discrimination in our society (Nisbet, Matthew, Fahy).

Moreover, this book makes you ponder over ethical questions historically raised by certain events as they unfold or those that are still rippling currently (Smith, Joshua). Following are the examples of unethical and immoral experiences that were faced by Henrietta and her family.   
1- She wasn’t informed that her cells have been taken away from her for scientific research purpose (Smith, Joshua).

2- Her family did not even know about Henrietta’s tissue samples and their use in innumerable fields. It was their genetic right to know as their DNA also links with the cells of Henrietta (Smith, Joshua).

3- Henrietta and her decedents had zero profit where many individuals and different corporations earned profits of millions by using her cells (Smith, Joshua).   
 Other than Skloot, other journalists and authors did not even bother to look up to the story behind the discovery of HeLa with ethical perspectives. Furthermore, another strong thing about this book is that it contains Henrietta’s complete biographical description and different interviews of her family. She has raised thought-provoking ethical questions from them. Skloot has made sure to keep a tone throughout in her book which does not make the readerto separate ethics and science from the family. Moreover, she makes her readers understand that these aren’t implications, abstract questions, and impacts, and they are reading about valuable and actual historical events and people.

Where this book has much strength, there it has some weaknesses as well. The framework of this book is about the journey of the author, writing story of Henrietta, what actually happened to her and interactions of her with the family of Henrietta. Writing all that, the author has mentioned a lot of details about her journey. Readers would feel more interest if she had added fewer details about her journey and more details about the involvement of science and ethical implications. Readers may find it boring and less interested to read about the trips of the author to the birthplace of Henrietta and they may not care how many times Skloot circled the block.

Furthermore, her book contains a lack of clarity. Her biography approach needs to be more focused and defined. The narrative diverged through the interest of author in several people, as author met them in the way: Henrietta's instant family, Henrietta’s extended family, Henrietta's oldest daughter, a con artist, scientists, a grocery store owner, Henrietta's youngest daughter, and Henrietta herself, etc. It reflected everything as a side dish. Not a single specific biography fulfilled as the main course.

As a science writer, Skloot was always obsessed with HeLa and the black American woman who was behind this discovery. She did not realize how much emotional baggage and backstory there still is until she started communicating with the family of this woman and people who are connected with the family of Henrietta. She discusses the difficulties she faced for finding the truth behind the story of Henrietta. In her quest, she found out how much aggressive family of Henrietta was to talk with a reporter about their mother's and wife’s famous cells. Author instantly detected the issue that Henrietta’s family was mistreated a lot by the science community and media and first she will need to earn their trust before getting any detail which will allow them to tell her about the entire story.

Skloot explains came to know that after Henrietta was diagnosed with cervical cancer and doctors' started her treatment, some of the tissue of Henrietta were removed from the tumor and were sent to George Gey's lab at Hopkins. These tissues were sent to be grown or to be cultured in test tubes. At Hopkins, in tissue culture department, Gey was the head, he had been trying for so long to find a way for cells to divide infinitely and continuously in the lab which can help the scientific community to have an unlimited human cells supply for the purpose of experimentation.

No one knew about that Henrietta's tissue samples were taken to the lab. Not a single person was informed, not even Henrietta. Neither Hopkins nor Gey ever tended to inform Henrietta or her family members about what they have taken. They did not even bother to inform even when the cells started growing at a remarkably faster rate and Gey with the rest of the scientist and scientific world realized they made an enormous innovation in medical technology. They may have thought that the poor and uneducated family of Henrietta has nothing to do with all of this. Skloot focuses that they should have focused on saving the life of Henrietta whose cancer cells were spreading fast in her entire body just like in a lab. She did not survive this disease and died, leaving five young children and a husband behind at the age of 31 (Skloot).

Her husband allowed a cousin to move into his house with his wife to look after their children. But they turn out to be very abusive with their children and they all suffered horribly in the hands of their relatives. Joe and Deborah suffered to the extreme. Deborah was sexually harassed by Galen and Joe was beaten and secluded from the entire family (Skloot).

Skloot describes her work with Deborah to uncover Henrietta's death, transformation into immortal cells and life story (Skloot). She has described how the doorway of problems was opened upon this family and what thick and thin they have been going through for years while the rest of the world was celebrating their family's immortal cells. In short, she has tried hard to capture all about Henrietta's life and whatever happened with her (Skloot).

Skloot has made sure that her readers do not get disappointed after reading what’s inside the book and included everything that is promised in the title. Her research is through about Henrietta but she could have done better. Although author has paid attention to the most significant part of HeLa discovery, told the entire world about the woman who was behind it, what she went through and how she was backed off from the entire picture, her way of writing sure is inspiring, thought-provoking and emotional, but as a reader I would say it lacks in readability. However, after reading this book my heart aches for this important woman and her family, I now want to know more about this legendary woman in history. I am glad I had a chance to read Skloot’s book, it has such a thought-provoking, and a fascinating topic which raises moving ethical questions for the woman and her family. After reading this book, the reader gets the impression of wanting more details about the woman, what happened to her and how her family suffered as well as about the science involved in this matter. Moreover, readers expect more coverage of present and past ethical implications, keener look at the implications and impacts of HeLa cell line on the descendants of Henrietta, and a more thorough, refined and advanced biography of Henrietta. The tone of the author was sublime and inspiring, her aim was to awaken emotions for Henrietta and her family inside the hearts of her reader and she successfully managed to accomplish that. Without a doubt, the author was brave in saying the truth and she has made a brave choice writing this book.

Works Cited

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