

# Book reflection: the immortal life of henrietta lacks



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The book, *Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot (2010) talks of the journey of a Virginia mother who changed the whole world through her cells without her knowledge. It focuses on Henrietta Lacks' life: her journey since she was diagnosed with cervical cancer in the year 1951, her five children and her untimely death at the age of 31 together with the life afterwards of her children. During her diagnosis, The John Hopkins Hospital removed a tissue from the tumor that killed her and went ahead and "immortalized" it. It is surprising to note that Henrietta consent was not factored neither that one of her family. The extraction of a tissue from Henrietta's body enabled the scientists in the hospital to grow a cell line where the medical industry could perform experiments in ways they could not do with living people. The cells were labeled "HeLa" for Henrietta and Lacks, after decades of testing and experiments, there was a breakthrough in the medical industry where developments have been made in the treatment of polio, Parkinson's, cancer, influenza, leukemia, getting wider knowledge of the human chromosome, significant steps towards organ transplantation and techniques used in in-vitro fertilization techniques.

Upon reading this book, various themes play out but among these are three predominant ones which I will reflect on. These are; medical ethics, racism in medicine and the dehumanization of Henrietta Lacks.

### Medical Ethics

In this book, Rebecca Skloot raises critical questions about the medical ethics and whether the human subjects have rights. We see in the book that when Henrietta complained of a knot inside her, her doctor advised her to go

to the John Hopkins gynecology clinic. During her treatment, Dr. Jones confirmed that what he saw inside Henrietta was unique and in his medical profession had never seen anything like that. He took a cell sample from Henrietta's tissue for a test in the pathology lab without asking or informing Henrietta. Furthermore, she was not informed that the cervical cancer treatment she is receiving might render her infertile. The two gross medical misdemeanors were just the beginning, and shockingly they were very rampant during those years. Doctors could easily take tissue samples from living patients without their consent since there was no law in place for such. It was believed that doctors knew best and had the patient's interest at heart when carrying out any procedures. Additionally, patients who were poor received free treatment and to doctors, this meant that such patients could be used as research subjects. In fact, some viewed it as a fait trade since research subjects served as payment. Could it be that Henrietta's race and social class justified what was done to her?

Rebecca Skool also highlights the experiment of Dr. Southam, where he injected cancer cells to sickly patients in order to see how quickly their immune system will fight back the disease. This is an experiment whose benefit was only to cause devastating effects for the victims. Another ethical question that needs to be asked is whether Henrietta's family should be given the biological ownership of their mother's cells or the cells are now under the ownership of modern science? Now that the family is aware of the scientific advancement achieved as a result of the cells, should they be compensated by the bio-tech companies or whenever a scientist uses the cells, should the family consent be sought first? The medical industry is seen

to show that the astronomical benefits that have been provided by Henrietta's cells to the human race is far more important than the needs and desires of a single family.

### Racism in Medicine

Rebecca Skloot shows us pretty convincingly in this book that institutionalized racism was alive and well. The author shows that this racism influenced the relationship that existed between the doctor and patient and as result what was birthed was unethical scientific research. The Lacks' family access to healthcare was affected since the largely white community did not care to understand the harm and anxiety created by HeLa. The family is given no mega-share of the high profits earned by the biotech companies from using Henrietta's cell. Deeply rooted racism is seen in the American medical system as the black people are treated unethically and in a biased manner (Erlen, 2008). The Tuskegee syphilis study, where uneducated Black Southerners were used as test subjects to study the progression of syphilis plays a vital role in shaping distrust of the medical system amongst the black communities. In Mississippi, appendectomies and hysterectomies were performed on black women without their knowledge in order to stop them from reproducing. These instances, contribute to the mistrust many black people have on doctors and medicine. The issue was compounded by Henrietta's story that it even led to Henrietta's husband, Day, refusing medical treatment.

The scientists that used tissues belonging to Henrietta in various research won international awards and received recognition but Henrietta stayed

completely unnoticed. Henrietta's children grew up with no pride for their mother's cell but were however traumatized. Despite the success of their research, no scientist saw the need of including this black family which was largely poor. To make matters worse this black family did not even have health insurance.

There were also reporters who tried to exploit the family with the notion that since they lacked education, they ought to be stupid and gullible. Deborah confirms to Rebecca that it is too late for her generation to reap any benefits from their mother's cells. However, she tells Rebecca to instead support and better the economic status of their children help their using the proceeds she will get from her book. Later on, Deborah passes on, her health deteriorated as a result of conditions that if she was a privileged member of the society, her condition would have been prevented. This proves to show that racism is still alive and well in America and the author has gone a long way in depicting this vice and is at the forefront of fighting it.

### The Dehumanization of Henrietta Lacks

This is one of the central theme in this book. Dehumanization is evidently depicted in this book as a human being is stripped of her humanity and individuality and is undermined into something. Henrietta's cells took center stage the moment George Gey discovered their incredible ability. Henrietta is reduced to just a mere source. The cells moved from lab to lab and not even one individual, be it the scientists who first packaged the cells or the thousands of doctors who used her cells for medical discoveries, thought of Henrietta. The young mother of five children, ceased being a mother and

became the source of a cell line that led to groundbreaking medical advancements that changed the whole world. To illustrate how the dehumanization is depicted, when Mary Kubicek was performing an autopsy on Henrietta's body, the painted toe nails of Henrietta made Kubicek realize that the person behind the famous HeLa cells was a human being, a live woman. She affirms this herself when she said, she had " never thought of it that way" (Skloot, 2018).

Henrietta's dehumanization has an adverse effect on her family. To the family, HeLa cells are not just a culture of cells that are on a petri dish. They are the only pieces of their family member: a wife, a sister, a mother: on this planet. To them, you cannot separate HeLa from Henrietta or Henrietta from HeLa, they are one entity. When the family read articles where HeLa cells are being crossed with tobacco or the cells being injected with AIDS or Ebola, they don't just see microscopic cells rather they see a mother, friend, wife and aunt being treated inhumanely. When amazing discoveries that are life-saving and for a worthy cause are attributed to the HeLa cells, they visualize their mother, friend and wife as having done all that. Near the end of the book, one family member, Gary, who is Henrietta's nephew, claims whatever science or medicine may claim " those cells are Henrietta."

In conclusion, Henrietta Lack not only lived a life revolving around her but also made a significant impact in her family. The scientific field is forever indebted to Henrietta Lack since it is her cells that led to the making of new vaccines and learning of interesting facts about the DNA. The book has shown the impact that Henrietta had in her community and that no matter how the scientific world gave a cold shoulder to her family, her contribution

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to the medical industry cannot be ignored. The underlying injustices that played down in this book should not be ignored and a discussion should be fronted to ensure that such instances do not happen to anyone ever again.

## References

- Erlen, J. (2008). Race and Medicine in Nineteenth-and Early-Twentieth-Century America Todd L. Savitt. *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History* 25, no. 2 , 561-562.
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