
Building and Presenting Power Relations in Roots

Alex Haley's 1976 novel, *Roots*, portrayed the history of a Kunta Kinte's family as an epic story of survival. Haley presented the history of a man and his family torn apart, but not broken, under enslavement in America. The experiences that ravaged Kunta Kinte's family life display the lack of institutional power of those enslaved. Although Kunta and Bell do not have institutional power, they do possess a limited amount of power within their nuclear family unit. Haley's depiction of an enslaved family contradicts reports on the black family by sociologists such as E. Franklin Frazier and the Moynihan Report, which supported a matriarchal family structure. *Roots* depicts Kunta and Bell as equals, with regards to the amount of power vested in each individual. Neither the female nor the male, has a greater amount of power. Both are virtually powerless. Haley's novel, *Roots*, portrays the conflict between the lack of institutionalized power and the limited amount of familial power.

Roots was published at a time where the structure and history of the American black family was a very contentious issue. In 1965, approximately ten years before the novel's publication, the U.S. government published the Moynihan Report. The report placed the blame for continuing black inequality, upon the very structure of the black family.¹ "Moynihan's central thesis was that the black family was crumbling and that a major part of the blame lay with the black matriarchy extant in the black community".² Much of the information in the infamous Moynihan Report was first publicized by the prominent black sociologist Franklin Frazier, who published one of his studies on black culture in 1939. Frazier wrote that, "the Negro woman as wife or mother was the mistress of her cabin...and her wishes in regard to mating and family matter were paramount".³ In a sense, the Moynihan Report updated the early findings and observations of Frazier.

Scholars such as Robert Staples and Angela Davis rose to challenge the assertions made by Frazier and Moynihan. Staples stated that "a matriarchy is a society in which some, if not all, of the legal powers relating to the ordering and governing of the family—power over property, over inheritance, over marriage, over-the-house—are lodged in women rather than men".⁴ He argued that a matriarchal family structure was not plausible because the black woman was exploited because of both her gender and race.⁵ Davis was another sociologist who refuted the matriarchy thesis. She stated that the matriarchal structure presented by some ignored "the profound traumas the black woman must have experienced when she had to surrender her child-bearing to alien and predatory economic instincts".⁶

In the novel *Roots*, Alex Haley depicts the struggles of an enslaved family. Under enslavement, Kunta Kinte and Bell's lives are dictated by their status of being owned by Master Waller. Bell

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has a limited amount of power when it comes to trivial matter such as the appearance of her cabin, but when it comes to important matters such as keeping the family together, Bell (and Kunta) possessed no institutional power. Evidence which refutes Frazier's thought that the mother had control over her cabin and family life, is displayed when Kunta and Bell's child, Kizzy, is sold. Neither of her parents can change the horrible fate of their only child. Bell pleads with Master Waller, "Don' split us up!",⁷ but to no avail. Kunta tries to physically save his daughter but he "crumpled to his knees"⁸ after he is hit by the butt of the sheriff's pistol as it "crashed above his ear".⁹ Both the mother and the father, female and male are rendered powerless in the situation. This example exemplifies Davis' thoughts on the lack of institutional power held by enslaved women, in the face of the whims of their masters.

"The cultural stereotype of the domineering black woman belies the existence of the masses of black women who constituted a defenseless group against the onslaught of white racism in its most virulent sexual and economic manifestations".¹⁰ The lives of enslaved women could be destroyed at any moment. After Kizzy was taken away, she was sold to a man of the name, Tom Lea^{2E} The first night Kizzy is under Lea's ownership, he rapes her. "Then came the searing pain as he forced his way into her, and Kizzy's senses seemed to explode".¹¹

After Kunta and the other Africans get off the big "canoe" and wait for the slave auction to commence, "he and his mates had had to sit there, burning with humiliation at being helpless to defend their women, let alone themselves".¹² The women were powerless, as they could not stop the continual rape at the hands of the "toubob" and the men were powerless because they could not aid the women. Another instance where Kunta feels hopeless because he cannot aid a woman in need, occurs while at a slave auction, he hears "a chained Jola woman shrieking piteously...beseeching him to help her"¹³ he feels a rush of "bitter, flooding shame"¹⁴ at the prospect that he could not or did not do anything to help the woman.

After an argument concerning a visit Kizzy was to have with Missy Anne, Bell "lay sleepless in their bed that night, he sat sleepless in the stable beneath the harnesses. Both were weeping".¹⁵ Neither of them, as parents could control whether or not their child went. Master Waller said "he promise Missy Anne to drop Kizzy off at Massa John's".¹⁶ Even though Kunta objected to this strongly, he could not do anything about it. It was not within his power "it was outrageous enough to have to sit by and watch while Kizzy was turned slowly into a lap dog, but now they wanted him to deliver the animal to its new keeper".¹⁷

Under slavery, the family structure of the enslaved was neither matriarchal or patriarchal. How could it be? The lives of those bound under slavery were fully controlled by their master. Even the basic rights naming was controlled. When Kunta arrived at his first plantation "home" he was given a new name, "Massa say your name Toby!".¹⁸ Kunta was "flooding with rage...and he wanted to shout 'I am Kunta Kinte, first son of Omoro, who is the son of the holy man Kairaba

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Kunta Kinte",¹⁹ but he could not utter a word. Kunta had no power.

There were instances within *Roots*, where both Kunta and Bell exercised power to control aspects of their lives, albeit a limited amount of power. Bell had been on the Waller plantation for many years and as the cook for the main house, she had access to information and the master that many field slaves did not, "Bell had more influence on the massa than anyone else on the plantation, or probably all of them put together".²⁰ Bell, along with her daughter Kizzy, had another form of power, they were partially literate. Ultimately though, these powers hurt the interests of Bell and Kizzy. Even though Bell had such high standing with Master Waller, she still had no say in the sale of her daughter. Part of the reason Kizzy was sold, was because of her ability to read and write. Kizzy's intellectual powers ultimately rendered her powerless.

Kunta also struggled to retain power within his life and relationship with Bell. The naming of their daughter was one instance where he asserted power. Kunta wished to keep the traditions of his homeland alive. One way was by naming Kizzy by the same ritual as he was named in Juffure. Bell was reluctant to allow this but "as deeply as Bell disapproved, she was even more apprehensive of what Kunta would do if she refused".²¹ Kunta named their daughter Kizzy, which as he explained to Bell, meant 'you sit down' or 'you stay put' which, in turn meant that unlike Bell's previous two babies, this child would never get sold away".²² Unfortunately Kunta's wish for his child, as it was represented by the name he gave her, did not come true. Kizzy was sold and even though Kunta had some power within his own family, he did not have the institutional power necessary for stopping his (and Bell's) greatest fear from happening.

Alex Haley's poignant novel, *Roots*, depicts the fight for survival as it was experienced by the family of Kunta Kinte. The novel brutally portrays the conflict between the slaves' lack of institutionalized power versus the power they retained within their family unit. Through many harrowing experiences, Haley presents Kunta and Bell as ultimately powerless in the face of their oppressors. Although the novel displays the precarious and vulnerable living conditions of Kunta and Bell, it also celebrates the resiliency of this family. Contrary to the beliefs presented by Frazier and Moynihan, "the slave system did not -- and could not -- engender and recognize a matriarchal family structure. Inherent in the very concept of the matriarchy is 'power'".²³ The portrayal of the enslaved family in *Roots* refutes the myth of black matriarchy. The novel does not try to prove a patriarchal family structure, it simply presents the lack of power of those enslaved.

Notes

1. U.S. Dept. of Labor, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, D.C. : GPO, 1965).

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2. Robert Staples, "The Myth of Black Matriarchy," *Black Scholar*, 2 Jan.-Feb. 1970, 341.
 3. Deborah White, "Female Slaves: Sex Roles and Status in the Antebellum Plantation South," *Journal of Family History*, 8 Fall 1983, 248
 4. Staples, 336.
 5. Staples, 335.
 6. Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *Massachusetts Review*, 13 Winter/Spring 1972, 84.
 7. Alex Haley, *Roots* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1976), 452.
 8. Haley, 452.
 9. Haley, 452.
 10. Staples, 334.
 11. Haley, 455.
 12. Haley, 214.
 13. Haley, 322.
 14. Haley, 322.
 15. Haley, 385.
 16. Haley, 385.
 17. Haley, 385.
 18. Haley, 232.
 19. Haley, 232.
 20. Haley, 336.

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21. Haley, 367.

22. Haley, 368.

23. Davis, 82.

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