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Transatlantic Slave Trade and Slavery in America

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Abstract:

Origin of slavery can be seen in America from the beginning of seventeenth century. In the year 1619 nearly twenty African slaves were brought to Jamestown, Virginia which was then a British colony. These slaves were actually seized by the British crew from Portuguese ship. With the growing demand for slaves the slave traders had a thriving business for more than a century by capturing, kidnapping and transporting millions of Africans from the African continent. The slave traders used to capture Africans on the west coast of Africa and brought them in the most inhuman and unhygienic conditions to America. Many of the slaves died on the way due to diseases. Later those slaves who survived were sold in open slaves markets of southern states of America just like animals. Throughout seventeenth and eighteenth centuries plantation owners of America depended on African slaves to work on vast stretch of lands. After the ban of transatlantic slave trade in 1808, slavery survived in America with natural births among slaves. This led to inter-state slave trade to meet the demand for slaves in Deep South. The slave masters committed humongous crimes on slaves for nearly two centuries. The economy of southern states of America completely depended on agriculture. The northern states of America moved towards industrialization and they were not depended on slavery. In northern states abolitionists started movement in favour of abolishing slavery in United States of America. Tensions mounted between northern and southern states of America and it led to the American Civil War. Finally the abolition of slavery happened in December 1865 with thirteenth amendment to the constitution.

Keywords: African West Coast; Transatlantic Slave Trade; Agrarian States; Slave Markets; American Slavery.

Transatlantic Slave Trade:

The origin of slavery dates back to ancient civilizations such as Egyptian, Greek civilizations and Roman Empire. After that for the next few centuries it was quite and slave markets declined and civil societies emerged with better human conscience at large. But the Portuguese stepped into the footsteps of the ancient uncivilized pirates and started to commit barbarous acts by enslaving the Africans on the coastal region of the so called Dark Continent. As William O. Blake mentions that:

The Europeans paid their court to the African chiefs, and a treaty of peace and commerce was concluded, in which it was agreed that the kings, on their part, should sentence prisoners of war, and convicts, to European servitude; and that the Europeans should in return supply them with the luxuries of the north. (Blake 23)

Thousands of Africans from west coast of Africa were deported forcefully to the American continent as slaves by the transatlantic slave trade where white people of European nations are involved. In seventeen ninety-three, Eli Whitney invented cotton gin, and this led to demand of cotton and naturally increased the cotton plantation across southern states of America in the first part of the nineteenth century. With the increase in cotton cultivation, the demand for workforce also increased by many folds and both became part of southern economy. It changed the political and cultural landscape of southern states forever. The region's trade, both exports, and imports, ultimately started to depend on slave labour.

Kenneth Morgan expressed that beginning of transatlantic slave trade is dominated by both Portuguese and Spain. Portuguese took slaves to Brazil where they had huge settlements. Spain carried African slaves to New Granada and New Spain. French and Dutch followed them later and shipped enslaved Africans to the territories owned by them in America. According to Phyllis R. Emert, British came later into slave trade and dominated with its superior naval power:

The English were not active in the slave trade again until the 17th and 18th centuries.... English goods were shipped to Africa for slaves. The slaves were carried to the West Indies and sold for profit. Then the ships returned to England with colonial goods and products bought with the money made from the sale of the slaves (Emert 9)

Great Britten came up with laws supporting trade in Africa. Some of the major cities like London, Bristol, and Liverpool became backbone to slave trade of the country. Huge numbers of slaves were supplied to its colonies like Virginia and South Carolina to work on tobacco, indigo and rice plantations. Phyllis R. Emert talks about second phase of triangle trade that begins New England:

Slave ships sailed to west coast Africa with a cargo of rum and they exchanged the rum for slaves. Then they headed on to the slave markets of the West Indies where the slaves were sold. The profits of the sale were used to purchase cargoes of molasses, which were brought back to New England and distilled into rum. (Emert 20)

The second leg of triangle trade was known as middle passage. It is the journey from the coast of Africa to the slave markets of West Indies or directly to Virginia and other ports of North America. The ships were packed with slaves only little food and water was given to them. Mortality rate was high in these Voyages because of the humble living conditions of the slaves which were loathsome. Slaves suffered from many deceases like smallpox, hookworm, malaria, dysentery .etc “one English vessel, the Hero, lost 360 slaves to smallpox.” (Emert 30)

On these voyages the slaves were placed in the ship as books are placed in a library shelf. The Right leg of a slave used to be chained to the left leg of another slave next to him. They were given water thrice a day and food twice a day at 10am and 4pm. These slaves were given vinegar to wash their mouths thrice a week. The lower decks were cleaned twice a day to remove all the filth. Unable to bear the inhuman conditions some slaves committed suicide.

Slavery in United States of America evolved over the years into an organized system by the slaveholders. As expressed by Franklin about slavery in United States of America:

In America, particularly the antebellum South had evolved a systematic approach to establish an organized institution called slavery. Southern states of America have even gone to the extent of having an established law in support of slavery. These laws were in force for centuries and gave the white people immense authority over black slaves. (Franklin 134)

White people in the South possessed unchecked power and were free to do anything against slaves without fear of punishment. Slave marriages did not have legal sanctity. Slaveholders frequently divided slave families by sale or by hiring them out. Slaveholders were empowered to sell some of the slaves from their plantations for profit to another slaveholder. They considered slaves on par with livestock who could be used as they liked.

The condition of female slaves was even more horrible. They were treated as objects of sex and they faced sexual exploitation by all the male members of the slaveholding family. Frances S. Foster observes that, "According to the slave narrators, no slave woman's virtue was assured and no man could offer any security." (Foster 109) Even religion is misused and misinterpreted to favour slaveholders. Slaves were always preached by southern ministers to obey their earthly masters, and that sin against their master is a sin against God. They subdued the anger of slaves with the help of religion. It is evident from the slave narratives that slaves were critical against the practice of religion by their masters. As William Brown discusses at length about the practice of religion by southern white population:

In Missouri, and as far as I have any knowledge of slavery in the other States, the religious teaching consists in teaching the slave that he must never strike a white man; that God made him for a slave; and that, when whipped, he must not find fault,—for the Bible says, "He that knoweth his master's will and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes!" Moreover, slaveholders find such religion very profitable to them. (Brown 707)

Slave trade was banned in 1808 in United States of America, but however it continued far beyond that. Smuggling of Africans into United States of America continued, as the demand for slaves never died down. Later, by natural childbirth among slaves they started to supplement the demand for slaves. The population of African American community rose to four million by 1860. Southern slaveholders viewed slaves as an investment. Well built, hard-working and skillful black slaves were highly valued and prized in the slave markets. It is a forced existence in an alien society for the slaves. They were uprooted from their motherland on the west coast of Africa and are shifted to United States of America. In their motherland, they were free birds just like Americans. But once sold in the slave markets as human chattel, it is nothing less than hell for them.

Slavery in America:

Life under the lash was harsh. The slaves were ill-treated and whipped to death. The white slaveholders went to any extent to control slaves on their plantation. Several states in the South made laws which were in favour of slaveholders. William Goodell states the laws from various southern states as:

In Georgia it is enacted, that “If any slave shall presume to strike any white person, such slave, upon trial and conviction before the Justice or Justices, according to the directions of this Act, shall, for the first offense, suffer such punishment as the said Justice or Justices shall, in his or their discretion, think fit, not extending to life or limb; and for the second offense, suffer DEATH.” . . . South Carolina has an Act in the same words, except that death is the penalty of the third offense, instead of the second. . . .

In Maryland, for this offense, the offender’s ears may be cropped, though he be a free black. . . . In Kentucky there is the same prohibition; and, as in Maryland, free colored persons are included. Penalty, “thirty lashes on his or her bare back, well laid on. (Goodell 305-306).

Life of women in slavery is hard to explain. Slaveholders purchased female slaves for field labour and as domestic helpers. However, slaveholders expected much more from slave women and slave girls. They aspired to have sexual relationship from their women slaves. If any female slave rejected the favours of the slaveholder, then she is targeted and blackmailed. The enslaved women are seduced and forced into sexual relationship by their slaveholders. Some women even gave up life to protect their chastity. Literally, they faced hell with their masters whom they disliked. When there was no law to save the slaves, the masters lived a life without fear of punishment or repentance. Masters were easily tempted to adultery and rape. Slave women were treated as pleasure giving objects, and their masters' father children with their female slaves. This led to the creation of mixed colour people called mulattoes. Genovese points out that, "Evidence from the slaveholders themselves confirms the existence of the stable interracial unions suggested in the narratives." (Genovese 418)

Human rights violation was at its peak, and nothing on the earth could control a slaveholder while he exercised his authority. Slaves were encouraged to get into relationships with other slaves. Slaves on the same plantation were allowed to get married. Once they got married husband was made to witness the whipping and raping of his wife. He did not have power to protect her. Slave parents' hearts kept breaking with the separation of their family. The master was free to sell their slaves for profit or take revenge on those slaves who revolted against the slaveholders. Nothing really belonged to slaves in slavery, they only exist to make their masters rich.

The immoralities of the masters affected even their household. White mistresses grew suspicious about female slaves who were in relationship with their husbands. Boys from the white community started exploiting slave women from a very young age. There was always tension in the master's home by his illicit relationships on the plantations. So slavery destroyed both the lives of slaves and the white people as well.

Slaves lived with the hope of running away to Free States where slavery did not exist. Many of them, with all the burden of slavery, just survived with the hope to escape to the North. There was a secret system called Underground Railroad to aid fugitive slaves to escape to freedom. People followed codes for their escape mission. The escape routes were known as lines

or rail routes and people who helped to escape are known as conductors. Slaves were referred to as cargo, and their hiding places on their way to the North were called stations. Not all the slaves were lucky to escape to Free States. Some of the slaves were either caught, or killed or brought back to the plantation. Once they were brought back, they were almost put to death at the hands of their master as a lesson for other slaves. Many abolition movements started in northern states of America and the issue of slavery led to the American civil war. Finally slavery was abolished by the thirteenth amendment to the constitution in the United States of America.

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