



Examining the Rhetoric of Race in American History and its Enduring Impact

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Abstract

Slavery, an enduring stain on the fabric of the United States, predates the nation's inception, persisting for approximately two and a half centuries as a sanctioned peculiar institution. Despite the nation's foundational assertion that all men are created equal, this study unveils a stark contradiction—a counterfeit commitment manifested through the embrace of chattel slavery since the inception of the New World. In this context, this paper delves into the systematic origins of racial slavery in America, commencing in the 16th century, exploring its enduring impacts, and shedding light on the resistance of the oppressed in shaping their existential identity. Employing purposeful content analysis and comparative study methods, this research meticulously examines the historical landscape. Drawing from a diverse array of sources, including research papers, historical texts, and dictionaries, the descriptive design framework of this study captures the nuances of racial slavery. With a primary focus on the cruelties inherent in racial slavery, the paper navigates the introduction of laws that sought to institutionalize it, leading to the consequential eruption of the Civil War in 1861. The author endeavors to make this research accessible to readers interested in the historical vault of slavery by unraveling its detrimental impacts on the nation.

Key Words: Slavery, Resistance, Identity, Civil war

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I. INTRODUCTION

Being convinced, slavery is a state of subjugation where a person is authoritatively owned or brought under the control by another person. The sustaining of such practice depends on the ability of the master to regulate the life of a slave through the use of power or any other means of threat. So, the term is relatively associated with the suppression. Recognizing, the key elements that lie behind its effective execution are the fear of torment and torture. Hence, it is the state in which a slave is ordained to its owner.

It is a generally accepted fact that the term 'slavery' has a pejorative inclination as it indicates to the human beings treated under the praxis of inhumane or subhuman positioning. In such an instance, the owners of the slaves or the masters possess all the rights to control the lives of the slaves and direct the slaves to discharge the services that please or benefit them.

To briefly outline, the slavery has been in practice in the world since the prehistoric period or millennia. Facts show, "The Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Mesopotamia, the Nile in Egypt, the Indus Valley of India, and China's Yangtze River Valley- had slavery." (Digital History 3027, 2021) however, slavery during those days was neither permanent nor was racialized as it was in the case of 16th century and the later phase in the New World. To have slaves during the period was a matter of honor and pride to the masters but it was not regulated in a systematic form compared to the slavery in the context of the New World that began with Europe's reaching out of Europe during the 15th and 16th centuries.

In modern history, slaves were purposively shipped from Africa to the New World during the 15th century. Data shows, "between 10 and 16 million Africans were forcibly transported across the Atlantic between 1500 and 1900" (Digital History 3034, 2021). With the transportation of them into the new world, 'The trans-Atlantic slave trade' (The New York Times Magazine, 2019) began, and thus began the sale of them as commodities or goods in the colonial North America as well. The Slave trade became a fact of the economy in

all the British colonies in America. And, with the pace of time, the commercialization of slaves got momentum. Before Civil War, auction of the slaves used to take place publicly on January first that led in creating terror among the slaves of the separation of their families. Harriet Ann Jacobs, in her autobiographical novel, makes a vivid explanation on how the slaves were put at auction together with the animal through a sample of public advertisement, “public sale of negroes, horse & c.” (13). To uphold slavery and bring it into dynamic functionalism, it was first racialized and then institutionalized. It was the naissance of institutionalized slavery that got solidified on the bedrock of different laws and acts in America that finally led this pristine land to march into the path of grimly ‘racialized statecraft.’ (Gilroy, 7).

In this milieu, this essay attempts to analyze the struggle of slaves in America and the racial efforts of whites, in the form of institute, to build an identity about the system of race. Moreover, this paper also explores the efforts of both the black and liberal whites to ensure the unison of the unions of America especially in the context of the antebellum to the Civil war period.

Hence, this paper aims to unravel the tendency of the struggle of slaves in America that was directed against the strenuous violence and exploitation against them in the form of institutionalized racism. On this backdrop, it explores the rhetoric of resistance, a potent political instrument that played a significant role not only on rooting out the system of segregation but also in paving road to fostering unity in America, especially after the Civil War period.

II. Methods

To lens the facts, the paper involves content analysis and comparative methods through consulting the authentic documents, chronicles, narratives, and the books pertinent to its references. The primary objective of the study is to contribute insight into the racial slavery in America and its profound impact on the entire nation. The examination extends to fundamental questions surrounding on racial slavery, injustice, and the ongoing struggle in America that is relevant even in contemporary times.

As the exploration unfolds, the study scrutinizes into the embedded values and assumptions of racial slavery and examines the principal issues relevant to give impetus to the devastating Civil War and its aftermath. In this context, textual data are meticulously analyzed to inquire into laws of endorsing racial slavery, the defense initiative of black slaves, and the struggle for freedom through the Underground Railroad. The author contends that a comprehensive interpretation of this section of slave trade, slavery, and racial exploitation enriches readers’ awareness, knowledge, and sensitivity to this enduring American tragedy that holds historical significance globally. Moreover, the paper is a reflective document on a ‘peculiar institution of slavery’ that undertakes to explore and analyze the elements of the sequences and the consequences of racial slavery especially between 16th to 19th century America.

Besides, this research paper aims to eliminate confusion and contradiction related to the history of the peculiar institution of the slavery and race-system through rigorous analysis of the documents in its result and discussion section. The study makes extensive journeying of the politics of resistance, recognizing it as a vital force behind shaping human identity.

III. Results and Discussion

Since this is an explorative research paper, it involves eliminating confusion and contradiction related to the history of the slave trade, slavery and the race system through rigorous analysis of the documents that are considered to be relevant to this study. So, this paper has embraced Slavery, Racism and Resistance as the key components of discussion.

Rhetoric of Race and American Slavery

Racism is an ideology that is created by humans and it is subject to adoptability. Scholars have strikingly refused to accept it either be genealogical, hereditary or natural. So, it is merely an invention of a particular group against another that is fairly based on hidden intent to devalue them. This sense of the assimilation of this ideology as true can neither be actualized nor can be experimentally justified. So, it is a belief system that creates an artificial stratification of humans based on a person’s race. And, the race is determined based on the distinction of the colour of skin or physiological characteristics like that of the shape and size of the nose, ears or head etc. This tendency caters, in conduction, to action or results in performance behavior with the intent of “exploitation and oppression of one ‘racial group’ by another” (Silk & Silk.1990). So, it is purely a creation of a particular group to exploit and second-rate another.

In the context of America, racism has gained momentum with the official recognition of it, in relation to slavery, by courts and legislatures in the 18th century. America went through undercurrent of aggressive racism and then internalized different values that were invented on the basis of the concept of purity as ‘white’ and impurity as ‘black’. Based on the origin or descent or based on the colour of skin, the classification began so intensely in America that it ultimately pushed the entire country into one of the biggest tragedies in history.

Barbara Jeanne Fields argues, ‘the chief businesses of slavery were the production of white supremacy rather than the production of cotton, sugar, rice and tobacco’ (99). In this context, it is obvious that the principal value that lies behind racism in America is the setting up of a brand of white skin over black that in the long run, unfortunately, developed into a threatening block to the Union of the United States.

In the context of America, slavery was strikingly sustained in racism and racism was maintained in complex of white superiority as “they were pure [meaning white] and didn’t have any black blood” (Rivera.1993). In retrospect, the sowing of the seed of racism, in America, began with the beginning of slavery however, it retained more time to slavery. It was experiential that the oppression was pervasive to the categorized racial group; especially the African-American, of people and the slaves were denied the basic fundamental rights. They were out of the mainstream of decision-making process. In addition, the social dignity to the racial slave was a distant dream. In such an instance, male slaves had to bear traumatic harsh treatment especially by the ‘Field Negroes’ (Riveria.1993) and the female slaves had to bear the double burden of slavery as they were sexually assaulted and were forced to discharge their services either in the plantation or house.

Compared to the North, the Southern part of America was badly inflicted by the system of racism. The white atrocities against plantation slaves were unbearable. The white Americans viewed Africans as sub humane and they were brutalized beyond measure. Relevant to this context, Frederick Douglass wrote in his Narrative that he would prefer the condition of the meanest reptile to his own (P, 35) in the state of slavery. The male slaves were whipped and their bodies were dismembered and simultaneously, the suffrage was worse to the female slaves as they were raped by their white masters and the mulatto child used to be his property as a slave. Overall, black humanity was correlated to the beast as, “A Negro slave is neither man, woman, nor child.” (Bernier, 2007). This horrific legacy was pertinent in American soil and had developed phenomenal system. White supremacy was endorsed and imputation against the exploitation and suppression of the black slaves was beyond a measure. Moreover, white masters were, “enlisted to continue discriminatory practices to protect their entitlements, also known as white privilege.” (Rich and College, 2010). The discriminatory practice transcended the cruelties and had deeply set into the mind of the white extremist that it even didn’t end with the end of the Civil war and that has an infrequent impact even in today’s time.

Murder of 46-year-old George Floyd, a black American Man by Derek Chauvin, a white police officer in Minneapolis on 25 May, 2020 is a recent event that has made America rethink about the relic of scar for one more time. The disproportionate use of force by whites against blacks and minorities in America has remained a matter of big concern to all good Americans and has been criticized an act against humanity. It is obvious even in present context of time that the law enforcement officials enjoy impunity concerning the use of excessive force against people of color (In the shadows of the War on Terror. 2007). In fact, the racial legacy that had stride in the United States of America with the New World colony has augmented into a matter of whitish pride even in the 20th century. It was legitimized till the Civil War and has been, afterward, idealized with the ill intention to behave against the colour people in a certain way under “the same flag and the same laws” in the United States. So, Frederick Douglass has declared race pride as the problem of the United States which is a matter of pride to the white and a matter of shame to the black (Schaub,2000). Hence, race has been positioned at the heart of American slavery and this poison got programmed for the imposition of power to trap black in the game of violence. The racist ideology has equated black with the beast.

The Peculiarity of the Institution

American slavery had a deeper root in the southern part of the country especially after the 18th century. Color-line was the greatest challenge of this part as the extreme exploitation of the slaves was made both in the plantation and domestic lives. South was the site of center for the cruelty against black slaves whereby they could just stand silent against any sort of the violence imbued upon them without a single question. Slaves were sold like commodities or animals, provided with beyond enduring torture; they were maimed or even killed mercilessly by white masters. This had been common as slavery was institutionalized and there was no any disposition that could be raised against it.

In Virginia, legislation had recognized slavery through its act in 1669 that advocated, ‘correction of slaves might legally be carried to the point of killing them’ (Morgan, 1975). This declaration clearly gave a green signal to the white masters to be fully in charge of the lives of their slaves. It was the common and everyday fate of the black slaves during the antebellum period. Slaves were physically vulnerable and psychologically subjugated under this system. The enslaved bodies were “beaten, whipped, raped and murdered, but enslaved tongues remain silent” (Delombard, 2001).The black people, who sailed to America from the ‘atavistic land’ in a term of Langston Hughes, were traded as commodities and were punished like beasts. In such an intimidating situation, the black slaves had a great abhor towards their masters however, they could neither react nor resist. They had their living in dead with an unutterable anguished soul.

Historically, the New World colony brought forth the institutional setup of slavery but that did not get eased with the independence of the colonies with the declaration of the independence of the United States in 1776.

Albeit, the preamble of the constitution, which was promulgated with the independence of the thirteen states as the United States, envisioned to establish him as 'a perfect union' with a commitment to secure 'liberty' and 'posterity', it could hatch nothing to the slaves in the South. Despite the promulgation of the constitution and its astute claim on liberty, the torture and desecration were common in the Southern part of the country against the slaves. Especially in the eleven southern states, the lynching was carried out and an adamant injustice was maintained.

Though slavery was institutionalized all across the country till the late eighteenth century in America, the Northern territories had started to outlaw it since. As North had come out to be a non-slave state, the slaves of South started having it to be a dream land. To incur freedom, the black slaves started using a secret runaway route known as the Underground Railroad, especially from the middle of the nineteenth century, which was assisted by the free blacks, Quakers and the anti-slavery liberal whites to ensure their safer escape (The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. 2019). In fact, the Underground Railroad was the support network of the people who supported anti-slavery to rescue the black slaves to move into the land of freedom. However, this network was under the surveillance of the "bloodthirsty kidnapers" (Douglass.1845.p, 98) and there was a great risk to the escaping slaves. Were the fugitives caught, they would be returned to their masters or taken serious physical actions against by these agents or kidnapers. However, it was the trajectory 'Mason –Dixon Line', a dividing line between 'slave' states to the South and the 'freed' states to North, a lifeline to freedom.

These facts and the figures prove that the impact of slavery was extensive in the United States and that was strongly backed up by the various unusual legal provisions, acts and decisions by the U.S Congress, federal government and the Supreme Court. 'The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850' that was approved by the congress on September 18, 1850 clearly stated, "Slaves be returned to their owners, even if they were in a free state." (Fugitive Slave Act.1850) Besides, the Supreme Court's decision on 'The Dred Scott's Case of 1857' (Lincoln.1857), gave a big push to flourish in the aspiration of the slaveholders. Ultimately, the regressive acts and the decisions like that of the Fugitive Slave Acts and in the Dred Scott's Case stirred on the movement of abolitionists' that was in deep sleep consciousness of slaves. Abraham Lincoln, in his speech on Dred Scott's decision at Illinois, opines that the two decisions of Supreme Court in Dred Scott's case "first, that a Negro cannot sue in the U.S courts; and secondly that a congress cannot prohibit slavery in the territories." (Lincoln. 1857) have paved a road to entangle America into Civil War, which shook the very foundation of this peculiar institution.

Resistance: An Instrument to Change the Destiny of Black Americans

It is an established fact and natural that where there is inequality, oppression and the exploitation, there is resistance: a response against the incongruent behavior and hatred. In the United States, the oppression to color people (African- American) was intense and in such situation, to build up newer position was must and the affirmation to the "institutionalized racialized power" (Glasberg & Shannon. 2011) was impossible. Hence, the oppression and exploitation of the color people through institutionalized system by state mechanism, on its apex, invited rebellion which ultimately, according to Ruland & Bradbury (1992), "plunge the nation into the world's first modern war and threaten to divide it beyond mending (p,181)." The outbreak of the civil war in 1861 was consequent to long maintained repulsion in the concrete form of resistance to build up the newer identity of all the American citizens irrespective of the differences. It was indispensable when it was actualized that the grave problem of this country could not be solved by any other peaceful means. And, thus, it happened. In fact, there were complex reasons behind fighting civil war and it brought the whole justice lovers under a one umbrella. Within the run of war, the then president Abraham Lincoln issued emancipation proclamation in 1863 (Doren,19991. P,176) with an intent of giving a clear direction to the war to maintain the unison of unions. Charles Van Doren criticizes it to be an incomplete with certain limitation because it addressed to be "applied only to those living behind enemy lines (P.275)." However, it came out to be a milestone on the road to eradicating existing slavery because it changed the nature of the war. It accepted the black men into the Union Army and Navy, and made a promise to freedom on account of the military victory of the union.

The four years of the bloody war proved out to be more terrible than that was probably expected to be. This came out to be deadening in the history of the United States because this resulted in the lives of "620,000 Union and Confederate soldiers" (Catton. 2004) with life damaging impact to million. As there was no exceptional way out, slavery was abolished in American with the adoption of "thirteen amendment to the constitution in 1865 (Doren.1991. P, 276).

With this amendment, the malignant root in the soil got officially treated nevertheless; it left behind the strong scourge and scars to be never healed. Still, the traces of it can be observed in the behavior and response of the white extremist in the United States. However, the institution got dismantled and the structure of the racialized oppression was legally blurred in 1865. This was the time when the Mason –Dixon Line got bridged up and "the slavery came to an end into its last major place on earth" (Doren, 1991. P, 277).

IV. Conclusion

The narrative of American slavery unfolds as a terrifying and harrowing odyssey through the vast and captivating landscape of this nation. Particularly, the experience of racial slavery emerges as an unparalleled ordeal, casting a shadow over both masters and owners alike. Originating in the 15th and 16th centuries as an economic tool, particularly in plantation settings, slavery evolved into a profoundly flawed and peculiar institution. The legal framework that emerged discarded the foundational principles of humane treatment by stripping plantation slave Negroes of every basic right.

The narrative perpetuated the notion of inherent Black inferiority and asserted White superiority that weaved an accepted version of narratives which elevated racism to a cherished status. However, this same racial paradigm later plunged America into the depths of a profound tragedy marked by xenophobia. While the tormented and tortured souls of racial slavery did instigate changes in the practices and systems of racial exploitation and oppression on American soil, remnants of this dark chapter still surface intermittently.

In the contemporary landscape, the United States stands as a vibrant and diverse land, embracing its multiracial identity. The nation's ability to foster diversity and maintain a mosaic outlook is a testament to its exuberance. The undeniable truth emerges that the collective suffering borne from racial slavery weighs more heavily on the nation's conscience than any amassed wealth. The history of Black Americans, entwined with the legacy of racial segregation, emerges as an integral facet of America's overarching historical narrative. The profound lessons drawn from the traumatic 250-year history of slavery transcend national boundaries, imparting valuable insights into humanity and the dignity of life, resonating not just within the United States but echoing across the entire planet.

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