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IGNORANCE AS A MEANS TO PERPETUATE SLAVERY WITH SPECIAL
REFERENCE TO THE SLAVE NARRATIVE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Abstract:

The action of bringing someone or something under control or the process of subjugating others is called subjugation. The practice of subjugating people or a group was there in the history from the ancient times. Especially, in the African history, they were subjugated purposively by the Europeans, and were taken to the New World called the USA. The enslaved Africans were made to work on the plantations and mines of the European colonies. The European traders and Slave owners followed many tactics to keep them under their control. This article tries to analyse some of the techniques used by the traders and owners to keep their slaves in mental darkness. And also deals with how ignorance of the slaves served as the tool in slavery and how the slaves realized the importance of literacy to attain freedom or emancipation.

Key words:

Slavery, Subjugation, European Traders, Slave Owners, Enslaved Africans, Tactics,

Ignorance, Illiteracy and Emancipation.

Article:

The Weakest Concept of Unity:

The Countries and cultures of Africa have always been diverse and heterogeneous in their ethnic, religious, and social composition. The opening of borders, markets, production, world-wide migration and new communication led Africa to the acceptance of cultural heterogeneity. As a continent of many different countries, languages, and cultures Africa is by its very nature diverse. People with different life styles and different economic background all live together. The large number of ethnic groups of uneven size had made it difficult for Africans to develop into unified modern nation. So diversity was obvious and it was reflected in their cultures. Agriculture was the leading economic activity of Africa. Though, Africa was rich in mineral wealth, valuable forests, rivers for transportation and water falls for producing hydroelectric power, and world's best cocoa, beans, and yams, its economic development was not sufficient. Many African countries depended on one or two farms or mineral products for their lives. In case of any crop failures or drops in market places, the country's economy suffered. And so the majority of African countries relied on the aid from countries outside the continent. This helped the Europeans and other outsiders in the invasions of Africa.

Outsider's Invasions of Africa:

The coasts of Africa from the 16th century were invaded by the outsiders. They explored round its coasts in search of booty or trade. The north received the attention of the Spanish and Turks and the rest of Africa received the attention of Europeans. The Portuguese concentrated on the spice markets of the east, slave trade in the west, and the Mozambique and Zambezi rivers which had fabulous wealth in gold, and this resulted in their settlements in both Guinea and Angola. The expansion of Dutch colony at the Cape and the vast increase in the African Slave Trade produced the significant developments in Africa during the 17th and 18th centuries. European ships from Britain picked up the cargoes filled with slaves at the slave ports in the west coasts of Africa and they transported the slaves, across the Atlantic to work in the plantations of the West Indies and Continental America. Until the 18th century they had contact only with the coastal regions of Africa. Only in the 19th century they entered into the unexplored parts of Africa.

Early European awareness about Africa grew out from the writings of Arab explorers, geographers, and Portuguese historians. Europeans who settled in the USA were tempted by the idea of owning their own land and were unwilling to work for others. Convicts from the Britain were sent to work on the plantations. But they were not enough to satisfy the tremendous demand for labours, which made the planters to purchase the slaves. They first entered into Africa during their attempts to find a shorter trade route to India and Asia. At the beginning they started trading gold; soon the slave trade became more important and profitable one for them rather than the gold. The Portuguese, as they travelled, developed colonies along the Atlantic islands and invaded the neighbouring islands. They also captured the islanders as slaves to work in the fields and also to be taken to Europe. The slaves thus brought to the New World were made to work in the plantations and mines of the European colonies and were put to perform domestic servitudes. As the Europeans had to produce the products such as tobacco, sugarcane, rice, and indigo abundantly, the problem of deficit labour informed the need for the additional labours. Africa with the weakest concept of unity became their obvious target for the traders and invaders.

Tactics practiced by the slaveholders to subjugate the slaves:

Sale obviously was a psychological terror that shaped the lives and actions of our ancestors. It was the driving force behind the attempts to run away. Because, slaves knew that it was the death of their familial relationships and that too if they were sold to plantations in the south, they would never see their family again. Most slaves were sold first to slave traders and then taken by those traders to be sold elsewhere. They were called as Nigger Traders, and Speculators. They were mostly private businessmen. Slaves were sold to the wealthy person who bid the most money for them. It was the place where the slaves were separated from their family, as the bidder would not buy the whole family, except the strongest healthiest member. So the slaves met with a terrible fear of separation. Frederick Douglass in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* says that the very first tactic practiced by the slave owners was the earlier separation of the slave children from their mothers and destroying the information such as birth place, age, parent's name, etc. He also states that, "the white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege" (Frederick Douglass 1).

The slave traders followed many tricks to fetch more money in selling a slave. When it was known that a slave ship was due to arrive, it would be advertised in the town. Posters would be displayed around the town about the arrival of the slave ship. As soon as the slave ship reached the slave port, the slaves would be taken off from the ship and would be placed

in a particular place. There the slaves would be washed and their skin would be covered with grease, or tar, to make them look healthier. This was done to fetch money as much as possible. They would also be branded with a hot iron to identify them as slaves. The wealthy slave owners in the West Indies left the slaves under the supervision of other persons who were in charge of their plantations and were called as Overseers. The masters obtained regular reports about their business from the Overseers. The reports helped them to analyse the ability of their workforce and to make refined calculations to measure the productivity in a standardised way. It also helped them to determine how far they could push their workers to get the most profit. This led the slave owners to experiment with ways of increasing the speed of labour, such as announcing and rewarding them with small cash prize for those who picked the most cotton, and then requiring them to pick more cotton from there on out.

In *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or, Gustavus Vassa, the African slave*, Olaudah Equiano states “Overseers are indeed for the most part persons of the worst character of any denomination of men in the West Indies. Unfortunately, many humane gentlemen, by not residing on their estates, are obliged to leave the management of them in the hands of these human butchers, who cut and mangle the slaves in a shocking manner on the most trifling occasions, and altogether treat them in every respect like brutes.” (Equiano 105)

The slaves were taught to be submissive to their masters, not only to those who were good and gentle, but also to those who were unjust and unkind. Harriet Jacobs in her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* states “I admit that the black man is inferior. But what is it that makes him so? It is the ignorance in which white men compel him to live; it is the torturing whip that lashes manhood out of him” (Harriet Jacobs 49). They were also made to believe that it would offer favour of God and credits would be there, if they tolerate it up with patience even though they were harshly treated. They were also implanted with an example that Christ also suffered for them and He had left His life as an example for them to follow His steps. The slaves were kept in the bondage through many tactics but one of the most important ways was through deep and sustained ignorance. Harriet also adds that, “Cruelty is contagious in uncivilized communities” (Harriet Jacobs 52).

Ignorance as a means to perpetuate Slavery:

The institution of slavery survived on keeping the slaves as unenlightened as possible. Slaves were not allowed to read and write and generally they were not aware of the events

which happen outside their plantation. They were not allowed to communicate with the slaves of the neighbouring plantation and were prohibited from provoking rebellion or conducting escape plans, and could not attain the quest for freedom and the knowledge that came from being literate. Masters encouraged their slaves to drink more during their annual Christmas holidays, so that the slaves would fall sick as much as they could not perform their own duties. It made them to think of themselves as unable to be responsible for them. Crafty slave owners used the situations that forced the slaves to develop a misunderstanding of the nature of freedom. This way, slaves were made to believe that they could not handle an independent existence. Ignorance was thus served as a tool for the slaveholders to keep their slaves controllable, blissful, calm and satisfied. Once a slave learnt about a world filled with understanding, he could not be able to sustain in slavery anymore. He would eventually do what Douglass eventually did. He would certainly attempt to escape from his bonds. Therefore, literacy brought with it an understanding of the institution of slavery, and opened up before a slave the idea of justice and a quest for freedom.

The Abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass:

The abolitionist movement was a social and political movement which raised voice for the liberation, and the end of racial inequality and marginalization of all slaves. The Abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass was born into slavery around 1818 in Talbot County, Maryland. He became one of the most famous orators of his time orating on, abolition of slavery, women's rights and Irish home rule. Among Douglass' writings *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* and several autobiographies eloquently describes his experiences in slavery and his life after the Civil War. He died on February 20, 1895. His life began as an uneducated field slave and later developed immensely as he was moved to Baltimore, where he was first exposed to the ideas other than what his master intended.

When Douglass was at the age of seven or eight, he was selected to go to Baltimore to live with his former master as well as his father Captain Anthony's son-in-law's brother, Hugh Auld. He was then sent to Sophia Auld sister-in-law of Auld's wife in Baltimore. As Sophia Auld did not have an experience of owning a slave before, she treated Douglass very kindly. She began to teach him the alphabet, and to read, though it was considered illegal. Douglass states that, "she had the kindest heart and finest feelings" (Frederick Douglass 19). But her behaviour transformed as soon as Mr. Auld warned her that, "Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world . . . if you teach that nigger . . . how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave."(20). The concerned advice of Mr.

Auld made Sophia to convert herself from a caring mistress to an unkind slaveholder. This shows the way how slavery harms both the master and the slave. In order to conserve her own power, Sophia deprives Douglass of offering knowledge that she can. But Douglass, by his hard work and repeated practice educated himself. And he used his knowledge to examine the reality of his condition.

The knowledge that Douglass gained through literacy made him to understand the nature of the dehumanizing institution of slavery and the slaveholders' tactics to manage the slaves using their ignorance and illiteracy, strengthened his desire of getting emancipated. As soon as Douglass learnt to read, he came across two books that he read over and over. The first one was called "*The Columbian Orator* and the other one were the Sheridan's mighty speeches on and in behalf of Catholic emancipation" (Frederick Douglass 23). These two books made Douglass to believe that the literacy can be a powerful mode to overcome slavery, and through which he can spread the arguments and awareness against the inhumane practice called slavery. When Douglass was at the age of 20, he escaped from slavery and began a new life as a free man. When Douglass reached New York, he exclaims his escape from slavery as "I felt like one who had escaped a den of hungry lions" (Frederick Douglass 63). From that time onwards, he gave more importance to education, which he believed as a necessary component for all slaves to bring real change in their life as well as in the world. Thus the slave holders used the ignorance and illiteracy of the slaves to enforce slavery. But once the slave became literates, they took steps towards emancipation.

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