

Slave Rebellions: White World was the Slave's Jail

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Abstract: The paper focuses on how enslaved African Americans, powerless to overthrow the chains of slavery surrounding them till death, perfected the methods and forms of resistance to weaken both the institution and the world of enslavers. The article also delves into significant rebellions that shook the nation's consciousness and led to the beginning of the Abolitionist movement in the northern states that gradually became a national issue culminating at the beginning of the American Civil War.

Keywords: Chattel slavery, Dehumanizing, degradation, institutionalized cruelty, resistance, rebellions, underground railroad, women slaves

Introduction

Thomas Jefferson, "...all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights and among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

In the land of freedom, choices and individualism, the settlers of America gradually developed their brand of Chattel slavery into a dehumanizing institution of bonded labour that impacted African Americans adversely in both physical and psychological senses. It was not only the slave trade that brought slaves into the American continent. Their children, too, were born into slavery, and by age seven, they were made to work as house slaves; at age ten, they were brought to work in the agricultural fields. From a tender age, slaves experienced different forms of human degradation ranging from extreme depression, desperation and complete apathy. This dehumanizing system transformed itself into an institutionalized form of cruelty that created a sense of powerlessness amongst the Blacks, which either manifested into community solidarity to build an invisible wall of barrier to protect themselves or as nihilism when the slaves unleashed their internal accumulated anger on their children or spouses. To prevent their children from this oppressive world, they sometimes even killed them in infancy. White oppression created a dark alien planet for the Blacks in the white world. This process assisted in the ideological construct by the Americans to project slaves as cold, calculating tricksters who were lazy, childlike, oversexed and needed to be chained, controlled and subjugated.

The Physical Cruelty of the Slave Institution

Slavery in America developed as a labour system applied through superior force, constant surveillance and policing system. In the period stretching from the seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries, any negligence towards assigned duties and responsibilities was

met with various punishments ranging from branding, chaining, castration, muzzling, maiming and whipping. However, as slaves became expensive by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the standard form of punishment became whipping and chaining them. The situation was much worse for women slaves who were required to work double shifts both as slaves and to feed and take care of their families. Women slaves also had to forebear practice by accepting the norm to keep breeding more slaves for their masters (although there is no agreement amongst historians concerning this historical fact). White masters who sexually exploited slave women were often forced to sell them to keep the sanity of the white mistresses who could not bear to see mulatto children on the plantation, a clear sign of white masters' lust and adultery.ⁱ At the same time, it was common practice to encourage women slaves to get pregnant and fertile women slaves were termed as 'breed women', and they were given special treatment, good food, time to rest and relatively less work compared with other slaves.ⁱⁱ Slave masters also encouraged the pairing of slaves to ensure an internal production system for such an expensive commodity. Women slaves also had to endure another cruelty as the domestic slave trade became profitable for the whites, it frequently broke up slave families, and this process picked up the pace with the frontier expansion when young men began to move into new territories with their share of slave property.

The Psychological Impact of the Slavery

The psychological trauma of slavery was multiple, beginning with sexual exploitation, humiliation, punishment and poor health conditions due to overwork and inadequate food and clothing that lessened their life span. Slaves paid a very high price for psychological violence unleashed on them based on extreme obedience and total submission to the dictates of their masters. Despite this cruelty, they were required to maintain a sober appearance that complicated the relationship more than ever. Those slaves that managed to run away were described in newspaper advertisements as "stutterers", and advertisement carried their wound marks as signs of recognition. Historians now firmly believe that slaves generally suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome due to hegemonic control by masters over their slave's physical, spatial and mental worlds.

Forms of Cruelty on the Slaves

In extensive plantations, medical doctors took care of the master's precious commodity. Still, as most plantations did not have this facility, slaves had herbalists and magicians with their African knowledge to cure common slave ailments. This clearly showed different levels of oppression in small and big plantations depending on the crop type produced. With the ever-expanding Deep South, over some time, the cruelty of slaves in the Upper South became relatively less and interestingly, while the white masters created class divisions amongst their slaves. Slaves themselves lacked class consciousness as their common outlook towards slavery united them.ⁱⁱⁱ It is an established historical fact that the slaves worked from sunrise to sunset, and since they barely had spare time, in the words of a former slave, they never suffered from 'mattress fever'. Extreme rules, punishments, and denial of education represented the life of slaves. Applying stringent

Southern social sanctions and constant physical abuse was an established practice in the South. Branding, burning of slaves, putting them inside barrels with nails all over, placing them inside small sweatboxes with the only head exposed to the sun or placing the slaves on sticks with coal burning beneath, killing slaves who were no longer in position to work due to old age, sickness, accident, the constant physical ailment was a common practice. Slaves by themselves could never destroy the institution of slavery. Still, they constantly struggled and resisted this bondage system to weaken it. The house servants, due to their proximity to the master, passed vital information to other slaves if their family was going to be sold, punished, rented out or mortgaged. This helped the affected slaves to run away to escape, even if the escape was brief. The only slaves who belonged to neither world, were the Black Drivers, who were looked down upon with suspicion by all the other slaves and carefully supervised even by the masters. For the slaves, physical punishment was the worst part of slave existence, and most slaves had virtually no contact with other slaves or whites outside their plantation. Slaves, therefore, lived in a carefully crafted, isolated world of existential existence.^{iv}

Slave Resistances

Slaves knew they were not in a position to destroy the institution, so over time, they perfected the art of weakening it from the inside. Therefore, their most potent weapon against their masters was slave resistance, formulated and carried out in many ways to reduce their physical and mental abuse or secure better treatment from their masters. Generally, those slaves daring to run away knew their worth and had mastered the technique of playing the white master against the overseer or using the weak points of their masters and using the same for their purpose. By resisting the institution, the slaves not only lessened the plantation discipline and expanded living and survival space for themselves, but equally important is that slave resistance happened continuously and in everyday existence. Resistance was carried out in multiple forms:^v

- Feigning illness, work stoppage, negligence, pretending to be stupid, pouring white sand on the cotton to make it weigh more, and sleeping away in the thickness of corn field was another method. Some slaves refused any form of punishment, knowing well that they were valuable as property, and sometimes violence erupted in the field itself in the heat of the moment.^{vi}
- Commit crimes – arson, poisoning and running away and theft. Running away and hiding in the woods was a common form of resistance as other fellow slaves provided them with food, clothing and information. While running away, the slaves often applied particular substances on their bodies like red pepper, mud, turpentine or Indian turnip that would throw off the dogs from the trail. By hiding in the woods, the slaves took well-deserved rest and mental peace as they knew their absence meant an economic loss to the master.

Hiding was developed by slaves into a perfect art form, even if it was for a brief period. Slaves sometimes organized their secret groups using well-practised sounds of birds or secret codes, which were used even to help out runaway slaves. During these private meetings, they often stationed ‘raid fox’, generally a well-versed slave in giving wrong

directions to the slave patrollers. Meetings were organized to plan the theft of food, animals or other things they believed rightly belonged to them. Most field hands were involved in all kinds of resistance as they faced maximum exploitation, followed by house servants and skilled artisans who were often found to resist but only sporadically.^{vii} "Maroons" were a group of fugitive slaves who formed independent communities in far-flung areas like Virginia's Great Dismal Swamps and Florida Everglades. There were instances where slaves beat up their masters or used verbal abuse in the open, killed their masters, white overseers or even slave police patrollers.^{viii} Women slaves also resorted to resistance and violence to inflict injury or prevent them from being sexually abused or exploited. As women wanted to protect their families, they often used verbal abuse more often than not.

Slave Rebellions

According to Herbert Aptheker, there were at least two hundred slave rebellions in America from the early seventeenth century to the Civil War. According to Harvey Wish, the importance of slave rebellions was not realized by the abolitionists, who could have used it as a tool to attack this institution. In contrast, the slave masters preferred to maintain their silence over the issue to prevent the social panic that would have brought to the surface its inherent fallacies, to maintain their sectional pride, and even the Southern press avoided writing on this serious issue to maintain racial superiority of this 'benevolent' institution. However, slave rebellions in America were smaller and less frequent compared to Brazil, West Indies and Sant Domingue (which later became Haiti), as whites were more than blacks in America. Moreover, the American slaves established customs and rules that would govern the conduct of their masters without challenging the institution of slavery itself, "White folks do as they please, and the darkies do as they can." (Said an ex-slave).^{ix}

Slave rebellions began on the slave ships, and the quest for liberty started as soon as slaves were loaded onto boats or during their journey, particularly when the ships were sailing near the Gambia River, West African coast in particular near Sierra Leone, Goree, Cape Coast Castle, Cabinda and Cape Malpas. The most common form of resistance was suicide by jumping off the ship, followed by deliberate starvation, refusal to be treated medically in case of sickness and becoming delirious and uncontrollable. Generally, ship rebellions were carried out spontaneously due to multiple suicides or when women slaves managed to steal and hide weapons given to the males. Sometimes, slaves successfully took over the ship and forced the captain to take them back to Africa. However, in case of failure, which was more common than the success of slave ship revolts, the punishment was brutal and extreme to the point of using inhuman torture methods to kill the leaders irrespective of whether they were men or women. There was a provision for taking insurance coverage from slave insurrections, pointing out that it was a common phenomenon.

Slave rebellions were infrequent, but plots and resistances were many and localized, and most were short-lived. At the same time, there was no slave revolt from Nat

Turner to the beginning of the Civil War. According to Genovese, most slave rebellions were attempts to challenge the system and create fear in the minds of the slave masters. Slaves knew the futility of running away, so some slaves became habitual runaways to live a temporary life of respite before being brought back into the system. The flight was an act of individual resistance, sometimes in groups like the "maroon" group that ran away to join the Seminole tribe in Florida. According to an estimate by the mid-1830s, twelve hundred maroons in Florida were removed to the Southwest in the 1840s. Other forms of resistance were sabotage, disruption, obstruction, non-cooperation and malingering, pretending to be sick or ignorant, damaging property, tools and stealing. Sometimes there was a desire not to work, or in moments of heat, resistance awakened a free spirit against cruelty. In other words, there was a conscious and unconscious act of resistance. Lawrence Levine and Genovese believe that the slaves did not act like political groups or people. Their opposition was passive as it was not based on planned political action except in the case of rebellions.

During the colonial period, slave insurrections were common in North and South colonies. Harvey Wish had presented evidence that during the early period before the crystallization of slave institutions, there were instances when the white indentured servants had joined hands with the blacks against their masters, evident in the 1663 failed plot of both in Gloucester County in Virginia. It was in the eastern county of Virginia that reported repeated slave plots right from 1687 to 1730, which forced the colonial administrators to establish in 1726 a particular slave patrol unit and to prevent more slaves from being brought in, high duties were imposed on slave importation.

Organized Rebellions

On April 6, 1712, about 23 slaves who were highly exploited by their masters armed with guns and clubs set fire to houses on the northern edge of New York City and killed nine whites. In this slave insurrection, indigenous people joined hands with the slaves. Later captured by American soldiers, and all slaves were executed brutally. This was the beginning of the violence of retribution that far exceeded the mayhem committed by rebelling slaves.

The Stono uprising took place in South Carolina (1739). At this time, England was at war with Spain, and taking advantage of this, about twenty slaves from Angola gathered at Stono, and their leader was Tommy. They took out a procession, beating drums to invite other slaves to join them. They had arms crossed into Spanish Florida, during which they killed many whites and looted their houses or burnt them down but were eventually defeated by armed whites, in which 44 blacks and 21 whites lost their lives. Slave rebellions were also reported from Berkeley County and Charleston County, and these frequent slave revolts impacted slave uprisings in the colony of Georgia, from where slaves attempted to slip into Spanish-held territories.

The plot was unearthed in another instance of mixed revolt by whites and blacks in New York in 1741. A white man accused of supplying weapons and his entire family was executed, a white Catholic priest was hanged as a co-conspirator, thirteen blacks were burnt alive, and eighteen were hanged. Other eighty slaves were taken out of New York.

To prevent such occurrences from happening again, the New York Assembly implemented a substantial increase in taxes on the importation of black slaves. Still, this increase was later abolished by the British authorities.

After the American Revolution, the frequency of slave rebellions became fast-paced, along with the growth and expansion of the plantation economy and the rise of the Cotton Kingdom and powerful planter slavemaster class. Abolitionist propaganda did not overtly influence these rebellions. In many instances, the whites provided vital roles, support and assistance.

Slaves constantly encountered adverse situations and circumstances in their day-to-day existence that ranged from the threat of sale, break up of family, humiliation, harsh punishments and daily abuse of words that deprived them of liberty of being human and reminded them of their subjugated status, in this climate of mutual fear and resentment, both left space for compromise, bargaining, and agreement.

The so-called slave leaders, who were generally elders in the family and preachers, endorsed more passive forms of resistance and instead used their energies in the development of unique and functional folk culture, music, dance forms, and songs that provided them psychological protection against the highly exploitative system of slavery and also assisted in the development of family and community ties that created an internal capacity to face the external pressure from the dominant white community.^x

The state of Virginia was impacted most by the slave rebellions. Gabriel Prosser (1775-1800), a Richmond blacksmith (slave of Thomas Prosser) and his brother Martin, a slave preacher, started Gabriel Rebellion in 1800. They both were literate. Gabriel talked to blacks regarding the Rights of Men and the Declaration of Independence. According to Francis D. Cogliano, up until 1763, slavery was widely spread in America. Still, by 1800, it had become a regional institution that began to face threats from within as the main essence of the American Revolution influenced black slaves who, too, affirmed faith in human liberty and the sanctity of property.^{xi} Slave uprisings also inspired Gabriel in San Domingo. Martin held secret religious meetings where he used Biblical stories of Israelites escaping Egyptian's bondage to justify slave rebellions. Brothers had planned to march to Richmond from the surrounding plantation under the banner of the slogan "death or liberty" and plunder the armoury, burn the city and kill all whites except for Quakers, French and Methodists (as they were opposed to slavery) so they could take over the town on a pre-planned date of August 30 1800. However, sudden rains and flooding of roads made it impossible for rebels to come together, and some loyal slaves exposed the plot that ended this rebellion.^{xii} This was so serious that it led to the formation of the American Colonization Society in 1816, and the slave patrol laws were strengthened to prevent slave plots in future. However, despite this, from 1802 to the War of 1812, multiple slave revolts were reported, in particular, one initiated by a white man George Boxley who in 1816 instigated slaves to revolt, but about thirty slaves were captured and executed while Boxley himself managed to escape. In the opinion of Francis D. Cogliano, in the period from 1775 to 1815, there was a sudden rise of maximum slave resistance in the form of armed conflict,

flight, lawsuits and political pressure that clearly showed that more than Jeffersonians, it was enslaved blacks who understood the core principles of the Declaration of Independence that stated: "all men are created equal".^{xiii} During his trial, one of the rebels in this rebellion declared, "... I have adventured my life endeavouring to obtain the liberty of my countrymen and am a willing sacrifice to their cause."^{xiv}

Denmark Vesey (1767-1822) was a South Carolina slavecarpenter in Charleston who acquired his freedom through money from winning a lottery in 1800. He believed that:

- Slavery and bondage are against the teaching of the Bible;
- Slavery goes against democracy and Christian beliefs;
- He knew about successful slave rebellions in Haiti and closely followed

Congressional debates leading to the expansion of slavery beyond Missouri; he sought assistance from slave revolutionaries in Haiti.

He was also an African Methodist Episcopal Church member and was inspired by Old Testament accounts of Jewish enslavement and persecution. He thought about himself as a Black Moses who had been given power and insight to lead his people out of slavery. He even visualized that he would successfully secure West Indies and African assistance to establish his black state. In 1822 along with the slaves of Charleston, he organized an attack on July 14, Bastille Day, the revolutionary National Day of France. He attacked the city but was betrayed, and about 130 rebels were captured and 35 executed, including Vesey, but he never revealed how he came to plan this rebellion.

Nat Turner (1800-1831) was a slave preacher in Virginia and visionary who believed that God chose him to lead his people to freedom. He was the son of an African-born slave mother and was deeply affected by the violence and atrocity of the slave system. His life experiences and the mystical visions he dreamt of during childhood and youth convinced him that he had the prophetic power to carry out his actions. He, along with five associates whom 80 other slaves later joined, killed and burnt his own master's family and other whites. He destroyed their property in Southampton County but was finally captured after many weeks in hiding and executed. This led to the beginning of a debate in Virginia on whether to abolish slavery. However, ultimately, the issue was settled to establish slave codes.^{xv}

In 1839 African slaves transported illegally from Cuba captured the ship that was transporting them, the *AMISTAD* and attempted to take it back to Africa. They anchored on Long Island, New York, where the U.S. coast guard captured them. This case reached the Supreme Court, which granted them freedom.

Resistance in the form of Running Away

Although organized rebellions were not that many, the most common form of resistance was to run away to escape the brutality of the slave institution. They ran to areas considered unsuitable for human survival, like the Great Dismal Swamp on the Virginia and North Carolina border. Running away was such a common trait that southern newspapers were full of these advertisements that described slaves' scars and

distinguishing marks throwing light on the brutality of the institution. Running away was considered an individualistic act of freedom, including famous fugitive slaves like Frederick Douglas, William Wells Brown and William and Ellen Craft. Some of these created their unique genre of African-American literature in the form of ex-slave narratives inspiring others to follow in their footsteps. When these individuals ran away, it was difficult as they left behind their families to escape to freedom in Northern and Western states and Canada. The sympathizers who took them out through the Underground Railroad assisted them.

The Underground Railroad System of Resistance

Underground Railroad was applied to an informal network of people from different ethnicities in the North and the West who assisted the runaway slaves to walk on to the path of freedom. This network had its outreach up to Michigan and Canada. In the southern states, black churches and free Blacks assisted in their escape along with Quakers. Those with missionary zeal to end this brutal institution also aided runaway slaves. In Pennsylvania State, William Still was the head of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee; in New York, there was David Ruggles, the leader of the New York City Vigilance Committee; in Ohio, a white Quaker Levin Coffin assisted runaway blacks in Cincinnati. These incidents show that slaves were neither childlike nor satisfied with the institution. The fact that in 1850 Fugitive slave act had to be implemented to bring back runaway slaves, and in 1851 and again in 1854, troops had to be used to get back slaves from the white abolitionists reflected the level of exploitation and economic importance of this institution.

One of the most well-known female slaves considered to be Moses of her people was Harriet Tubman, who escaped to her freedom in 1849 at the time when she was going to be sold and taken away from her husband from Maryland's Eastern Shore and came to Philadelphia where she worked to gather monetary resources to plan more escapes and went back about nineteen times to bring about more slaves and made her last rescue mission in 1860 by that time she was known as "Moses of her People". These famous slave rebellions and their respective leaders became heroes to black people and were called "bad" by the whites. In the black world, the meaning of "bad" acquired a new definition, and it denoted a person of good power and fortitude possessing the quality of goodness towards humanity.

Conclusion

By the 1850s, it was becoming clear that the institution was evil. Still, since it supported the southern economy, therefore, the beginning of armed conflict known as the Civil War and the 13th constitutional amendment finally ended this institution in the United States of America, bringing to an end almost more than two hundred years of history of bondage, slavery and inhuman traits of a country that prided itself as the land of liberty, democracy and individualism.

Slave rebellions also occurred in Florida, Louisiana, Tennessee, Kentucky and Texas, and increased the frequency of revolts and rebellions began to make some political

leaders uneasy. They began to view the slave institution as inhuman, inconsistent with the political and economic ethos of the nation and if the government required cheap labour or the need of the hour was to create a new consumer class by emphasizing on wage labour system. In the meantime, in the southern states, the internal slave trade took a downward turn due to slave rebellions and therefore, laws against free blacks were made more stringent, slave codes were enacted, and attempts began to be made to prevent slaves from getting educated as most of the black leaders were privileged individuals like blacksmiths, a free black or a preacher- a literate man with excellent knowledge of the outside world. Religion also played a significant role in all slave rebellions; as Nat Turner had said, "Was Not Christ crucified."^{xvi}

ⁱ Escott, Paul D. 1979. *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth Century Slave Narratives*. U.S.: University of North Carolina Press, 46.

ⁱⁱ Escott, Paul D. 1979. p. 44.

ⁱⁱⁱ Escott, Paul D. 1979. p. 53 – 65.

^{iv} Escott, Paul D. 1979. pp. 38 – 69.

^v Escott, Paul D. 1979. pp. 93 – 94.

^{vi} Escott, Paul D. 1979. pp. 78 – 79.

^{vii} Escott, Paul D. 1979. pp. 75 – 90.

^{viii} Escott, Paul D. 1979. p. 80.

^{ix} Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*. New York: Pantheon, 1976.

^x White, John. pp. 11 – 12.

^{xi} Francis D. Cogliano, *Revolutionary America 1763-1815: A Political History*, Routledge, London and New York, 2000, pp. 182-183

^{xii} Douglas Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993, p. 51.

^{xiii} Francis D, Cogliano, p. 183

^{xiv} Douglas Egerton. 1993. *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. p.102.

^{xv} Vincent Harding. 1981. *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Also, Gutman, Herbert G. 1976. *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*. New York: Pantheon.

^{xvi} Gutman, Herbert G. 1976. *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*. New York: Pantheon.