

The Cruelty faced by African Enslaves during the Atlantic Voyage

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ABSTRACT: In 15th-18th century traders from Europe made the long voyage to the west coast of Africa to buy Africans as slaves in response to the goods of daily use. After the African men and woman slaves were purchased European traders shipped them to Europe under horrifying inhuman conditions. They travelled in darkness with no sanitation facilities, almost naked and perfectly chained about the ankle they lay there in those narrow holds for at least fifteen to sixteen hours a day. They were allowed a space hardly larger than a grave, five feet six inches long, sixteen inches broad and two or three feet high, not high enough to set up in. “*They had not so much room as man in his coffin, either in length or breath. It was impossible for them to turn or shift with any degree of ease.*”(Bennett, Before Mayflower: A History of the Negro in America. 1966). The cruelty faced by the African slaves has been discussed.

Date of Submission: 21 -06-2017

Date of acceptance: 17-07-2017

I. INTRODUCTION

There was a trade in between Africa and Europe from at least 3rd century AD. Gold was the main product that came to Europe. It was traded from West Africa through North Africa, to Europe, by Muslim traders. European merchants began trading directly with West Africa in about the late 14th or 15th century. Items such as cloth, beads, brass kettles, and guns made up part of the cargo on board their ships. The goods were a mixture of items that were produced at home and items that were bought from elsewhere. Europeans were using their goods to buy mainly gold, spices and ivory from the West African traders. .

Later in the 16th century the Europeans started trading for different goods: enslaved people. The Europeans were colonising the world and taking countries as their own. They were using the natural resources in their colonies to make money. For example, the British-owned islands in the Caribbean, had good land for growing crops such as sugar. The Europeans needed a reliable labour force. So when they realised that they could purchase enslaved Africans from the traders in West Africa, they did so.

From European port, supplies such as copper, cloth, trinkets, guns and ammunition would be shipped to a port in Africa. When the slave ship arrived, its cargo would be sold in exchange for slaves, who were often tightly packed like any other cargo to maximize profits. The ship would then make the journey along the middle passage to the New World, once the slave ship reached the New World, the slaves would be sold for a good profit. Traders made use of ships for the shipment of enslaved African but the way the slaves were treated during the long voyage was miserable and unimaginative. The same traumatic condition of the enslaved Africans is discussed here.

II. DISCUSSION

Life on board the slave ships was harsh. The captains were often cruel. The enslaved Africans and the crew suffered from the poor conditions and treatment. Disease was common and many could die on the journey. There are many accounts that tell us about the journey taken by slave ships across the Atlantic Ocean from Africa to the Americas. Some are the records of the voyage kept by the captain in the ship's logbook. This records everything about life aboard the slave ship. It tells us about the weather throughout the day, the ship's course, punishments handed out to crew or enslaved Africans, the rations given out to the slaves, and any deaths or sickness. Other accounts include those written by individuals telling of their own experiences on board the ship. Two famous and important individual accounts are those written by Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cuguano, Africans who had been enslaved. It is rare to hear a first hand account from an enslaved African. Few of the slaves had the opportunity to learn to read and write, and so few could tell their story to the wider world. Ottobah Cuguano was from Adjumako, today in modern Ghana in West Africa. He was kidnapped and enslaved in about 1770. He was sold to a plantation owner on the island of Grenada in the Caribbean. After he was freed

of slavery he wrote his autobiography, called "*Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*", which was published in 1787. Cuguano wrote 'Some of the Africans in my country keep slaves, which they take in war, or for debt ...'. Cuguano had been enslaved in his teens, so he had firsthand experience of the subject. People were enslaved in Africa for various reasons. They might be prisoners of war taken after fighting between warring states or ethnic groups. They might be people unable to pay back debts and taken by the person to whom money was owed. The another slave turned writer was Olaudah Equiano. Olaudah Equiano, a former slave, told how he and his sister were left playing in their house one day when the adults went to work in the fields. Raiders came into the house and kidnapped them, and sold them to other Africans. Equiano and his sister were separated. She might have remained as a slave in Africa, He was eventually taken to the coast and sold to the Europeans.

"The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. The air soon became unfit for breathing, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died. This wretched situation was made worse by the chains. The shrieks of women, and the groaning of the dying, created a scene of horror almost unbelievable. Three desperate slaves tried to kill themselves by jumping overboard. Two drowned, the other was captured and beaten unmercifully. When I refused to eat, I too was beaten". (Olaudah Equiano , 1789) It denies those people their freedom and what we today call their 'human rights'

Afro diaspora is the forced and brutal dispersal of millions of Africans into foreign lands during the African slave trade. (Blockson , African- American History: 1)

" They had not so much room as man in his coffin, either in length or breath. It was impossible for them to turn or shift with any degree of ease." (Bennett, Before Mayflower: A History of the Negro in America. 1966)

"Their horror may well be conceived When they found a number of them in Different stages of suffocation: many Of them were foaming at the mouth and in the last agonies- many were dead the tumult they had heard, was the frenzy of those suffocating wretched in the last stage of fury and desperation, struggling to extrica themselves... Many destroyed one another , in the hopes of procuring room to breathe, men strangled those next to them, and women drove nails into each other's brains. Many unfortunate creatures , on another occasion took the first opportunity of leaping overboard and getting rid, in this way of an intolerable life..." (Walsh 1831: 265)

"Some eight or ten were shot with small shot, in the hold of the Brig before they could be subdued. Some thirty or forty of them were then brought on the deck and two and two in irons, were hung up at the yard arm, shot, their bodies let down, and their arms and legs chopped off to get the iron of the corpses, and one woman was thrown into the sea before life was extinct" (Lawrence1932:134)

The trauma faced by women during the journey was even worse. They were maltreated, molested and even forced to give birth to the babies publicly in those narrow holds. One of the enslaved women writes: "I saw a pregnant women give birth to babies while chained to corpses which our drunken overseers had not removed." The space was not enough for them to lie with their babies on their sides.

In many cases, weak babies were tossed overboard to save maximum room for the fittest often women from whom they (the babies) were torn, fought with all their power left in them. Chained as they were some leaped in water after children, dragging others with them; other struggled until arms and legs were broken against the metal that held them; other struggled until arms and legs were broken against the metal that held them and unable to die with young, died on the board some days later from their wound and refused to eat." (Nobles 1978:33)

Death by water appeared to be the only escape from the inferno of slave ships. They jumped into the Atlantic, they became free." (Bain and Ervin 1977:131)

III. CONCLUSION

The American and European traders of 16th to 18th century used to earn money at the cost of cruelty to African enslaves. African enslaves were auctioned like consumable and non consumable goods and purchased by the so called civilized European and American traders. The trauma faced by the African enslaves during long voyages is unimaginative today.

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IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) is UGC approved Journal with Sl. No. 5070, Journal no. 49323.

Gaurav.S.Khetwal . "The Cruelty faced by Africans Enslaves during the Atlantic Voyage." IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) 22.7 (2017): 49-51.