

The Agony of The Slaves as Described in Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's The Slave Auction

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Abstract

Black people were treated badly and cruelty by white people since the first time they were brought to America in between 1619 – 1865. In America most of them worked in huge plantation as slaves. Black people were considered as the second class citizens, and under the system of slavery. White people had the right to own, to buy and to sell them. The purpose of this paper is describe the sad and bitter experiences from the slaves when they were selling through the auction. The writer used tone and the historical background theories to understand the deep meaning of the poem and to feel the painful of the slaves' conditions, as reflected in Harper's The Slave Auction. The results from the discussion show us the really terrible condition of the slave when the auction was going on, and hopefully that the cruel thing done by people to other people will not be occurred any longer now and ever after.

Keyword: slave, slavery, auction, tone, agony.

1. Introduction

Discrimination is a prejudice treatment of different categories of people. Discrimination against minority society is usually caused by racial issues that involve different race, religion, and complexion. Whereas it emphasized unequal treatment among racial groups but differ in the scope of unequal treatment among racial groups but differ in the scope of unequal treatment (Pettigrew & Taylor in Discrimination. 2000:688). Many people express their critics toward discrimination in many mediums. One of the medium is through a literary work in the form of poetry.

Poetry itself, according to Hibbard & Thrall in A Handbook to Literature 1960:364 serves in many forms which contains of rhythmic expression of the poet, intense perception of the world by the poet, or the poet himself, or either, the interrelationship of both side. While poetry analysis is an activity to understand what poet's intention on writing a poem. "The Slave Auction" is a poem written by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper in 1854. This poem is a detailed and practical introduction to the process of a slave trade. The poem deals with the horrible fact that children and parents just like married couples are pulled apart. Furthermore, it is about the misery and pain which the slaves conceive in those circumstances.

During the time, which Harper lived, it would have affected the way her poem was written. There are many words used in the poem such as 'unheeded', 'torn', 'defenseless' that shows the readers that she has been in pain mainly against people rights. This poem helps the reader know how the writer feel as if she was ignored, hurt, and cannot do anything during the trade.

Overall Frances emphasizes the inhumanity and pain slaves' sufferer because she wanted to show the readers the horrors that slaves had to face when they were being sold. Discrimination against black people is usually addressed to Africans and African-Americans people who commonly known for their dark complexion. They receive many kind of discrimination that marginalized their ethnic in western country.

The Trace of Black People Life. In the past, for a long time, there was the practice of slavery of black people in United State of America. The black people usually came from Africa; that is why they are called African Americans or Black Americans. White people became the one who dominant, and black people got lower position. The result of this condition was that black people could not freedom. They are usually prohibited from studying, reading, and writing. They were also prohibited from be having freely like humans.

Black people lived in many places in the world. However, in the past, each of these places gave bad condition to black people. According to Ulrich Bonnell Phillips in *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (2004), a rural owner disposed to sell a slave locally would commonly pass the word round among his neighbors or publish a notice in the country newspaper. To this would sometimes be appended a statement that the slave was not to be sent out of the state, or that no dealers need apply. The following is one of many such Maryland items: "Will be sold for cash or good paper, a negro woman, 22 years old, and her two female children. She is sold for want of employment, and will not be sent out of the state. Apply to the editor". In the cities a few slaves were sold by lottery.

Walter says in *American Black History* oppression and racial discriminations toward blacks in America had been lasted for years since black slavery entered United States. Black slaves become an easily targeted groups as inferior, fool, and were meant to be what they are, a slave. Blacks suffered from discriminations, violence, and judgements from oppressed society (2004:87).

The Slave Trade. The slave *trade* refers to the transatlantic trading patterns which were established as early as the mid-17th century. Trading ships would set sail from Europe with a cargo of manufactured goods to the west coast of Africa. There, these goods would be traded, over weeks and months, for captured people provided by African traders. European traders found it easier to do business with African intermediaries who raided settlements far away from the African coast and brought those young and healthy enough to the coast to be sold into slavery.

The majority of those sold into slavery were destined to work on plantations in the Caribbean and the Americas, where huge areas of the American continent had been colonized by European countries. These plantations products such as sugar or tobacco, meant for consumption back in Europe.

Those who supported the slave trade argued that it made important contributions to the country's economy and to the rise of consumerism in Britain. Despite this, towards the end of the eighteenth century, people began to campaign against slavery (Walter, 2004:112).

2. Discussion

Through the tone in this poem, it can make the readers understand how the bitter feeling of the slaves during the time of slave auction. According to Perrine in *Sound and Sense "Tone, in literature, may be defined as the writer's or speaker's attitude toward his subject, his audience or himself. It is the emotional coloring or the emotional meaning, of the work and is an extremely important part of the full meaning."* (1969:162). After reading some sentences from this poem we can say that the tone in it is very gloomy and miserable.

*The sale began—young girls were there,
Defenseless in their wretchedness,
Whose stifled sobs of deep despair
Revealed their anguish and distress.*

In the first four line, the writer describes the situation before young girls are “sold”. The writer uses some words that shows how the girls when the auction happens. They can not do anything except to accept it and crying by themselves. This gives the readers sad feeling.

*And mothers stood, with streaming eyes,
And saw their dearest children sold;
Unheeded rose their bitter cries,
While tyrants bartered them for gold.*

In the line 5-8, the writer shows how miserable the mothers when they see their children sold and the tyrants who bartered them with gold. It seems that the readers almost could feel how the mothers feel.

*The impress of their maker’s hand,
And frail and shrinking children too,
Were gathered in that mournful band.*

In those lines, the writer use the word ‘Maker’ to pint out that all their pain was caused by the slave owners that were controlling their lives. It creates an atmosphere that their owners are cruel and just make lives of the slaves more miserable.

*Ye who have laid your loved to rest,
And wept above their lifeless clay,
Know not the anguish of that breast,
Whose loved are rudely torn away.
Ye may not know how desolate
Are bosoms rudely forced to part,
And how a dull and heavy weight
Will press the life-drops from the heart.*

Those lines above show how hard the slaves life. They cannot do anything as if they are lifeless. They are forced to part with their families. They feel lonely and sad because they have to live alone and bearing a heavy burden in their life. They also never be able to see their family again. Besides through the tone, we can also observe the grief and bitter conditions from the slaves through the historical background of them.

*The sale began—young girls were there,
Defenseless in their wretchedness,*

As we know, the poem was written in 1854 which was the big era of slavery and slave trade. Over the period of the Atlantic Slave Trade, from approximately 1526 to 1867, some 12.5

million slaves had been shipped from Africa, and 10.7 million had arrived in the Americas. From the first line in the poem, the writer tells the readers that the sale was about young girls. It is true that mostly of the auction were girls. They were sold and then sent from Africa to America. Just like the situation at that time, people who were ready to be sent, they have to be ready to work with Americans no matter what happen. They will be separated from their family and lives alone as a slave of America.

While tyrants bartered them for gold.

The slaves were sent from America or Europe and maybe this is the reason why The Atlantic Slave Trade was likely the most costly in human life of all of long distance global migrations. People who buy them or sometimes called tyrants, often bartered them with gold.

*And frail and shrinking children too,
Were gathered in that mournful band.*

This is reflecting the situation after the children were bartered with gold and ready to be sent to America. They finally separated with their family and this I one of the most cruel happenings in slave auction because parents and children, the both knew in their heart that they would never get to see each others again.

*Ye who have laid your loved to rest,
And wept above their lifeless clay,
Know not the anguish of that breast,
Whose loved are rudely torn away.*

Slaves suffered a variety of miserable and often fatal maladies due to the Atlantic Slave Trade, and to inhumane living and working conditions. Common symptoms among enslaved populations included: blindness; abdominal swelling; bowed legs; skin lesions; and convulsions. Common conditions among enslaved populations included: beriberi, pellagra, tetany, rickets, and kwashiorkor.

As the writer say “*lifeless clay*”, it might the effect of this inhuman living could be a death. This is because the slaves worked too hard and always ignored their health.

*Ye may not know how desolate
Are bosoms rudely forced to part,
And how a dull and heavy weight
Will press the life-drops from the heart.*

The life of slaves were very awful. They are not treated like humans. They have to work hard in the fields every day and their never get health insurance. They were separated with their parents or their family.

Towards the end of the eighteen century, people began to campaign against slavery. However, since trading was so profitable for those involved, the ‘Abolitionist’ (those who campaigned for the abolition of the slave trade) were fiercely opposed by a pro-slavery West Indian lobby. Those who still supported slavery used persuasive arguments, or ‘propaganda’, to indicate the necessity of the slave trade.

3. Conclusion

From the poem “*The Slave Auction*” by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, we can see the hard life of slaves that were being sold. This poem describes how miserable the slave’s life when they were separated with their family and have to live alone in different island. The writer helps the readers to know how horrible the circumstances of the slaves were and which pain and sorrow they had to live with and the effect of the trade in many people. The writer succeed to make the readers feel the painful which were felt by the slaves. By using the tone and the historical background of the slave, it is to be hope that the readers can feel the agony that the slaves got and faced. It is also to be hoped that the bitter experience will never do again by human beings.

The Poem “The Slave Auction” By Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

“The Slave Auction” (1854)

The sale began—young girls were there,
Defenseless in their wretchedness,
Whose stifled sobs of deep despair
Revealed their anguish and distress.
And mothers stood, with streaming eyes,
And saw their dearest children sold;
Unheeded rose their bitter cries,
While tyrants bartered them for gold.
And woman, with her love truth—
For these in sable forms may dwell—
Gazed on the husband of her youth,
With anguish none may paint or tell.
And men, whose sole crime was their hue,
The impress of their Marker’s hand,
And frail and shrinking children too,
Were gathered in that mournful band.
Ye who have laid your loved to rest,
And wept above their lifeless clay,
Know not the anguish of that breast,
Whose loved are rudely torn away.
Ye may not know how desolate
Are bosoms rudely forced to part,
And how a dull and heavy weight
Will press the life-drops from the heart.

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