

Racial Segregation

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“If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong”, says Lincoln.

In the field of Literature, Mark Twain is considered as the Lincoln. “Emerson, Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes - I knew them all and the rest of our sages – poets, seers, critics, humorists; they were like one another and other literary men, but Clemency (Mark Twain) was sole, incomparable the Lincoln of our Literature” (Howells 1967:8).

Like Lincoln, Twain was consistent regarding the question of abolition of slavery. No one who had read the complete notebooks of William Dean Howells can disagree with him when he remarked about the Mark Twain he knew in the post civil war era, “No man more entirely abhorred slavery (Ibid:10)”.

From the beginning, slavery in America had been linked to race, but the clear concept of formal racism – based on the ideology of black inferiority emerged only in the 19th century. After the 1830s, abolitionists saw slavery as an individual sin by each slave owner under such moral justification. Belief in the unchangeable inferiority of blacks provided the moral ground for seeing slavery as a paternal institution.

Beginning with Dr. Samuel George Morton’s *Crania Americana* (1839), a string of scientific arguments appeared suggesting how and why the inferiority of blacks came to be. In the 1830s Thomas Drew proposed that blacks were inherently “savage” and needed slavery to domesticate them. In the 1860s, a Louisiana physician named Samuel Cartwright argued that blacks were some of the animals created before Adam and Eve, over which Adam was given dominion. Jefferson Davis held a similar view, and slavery apologist W.W. Wright contended that the strangely felt prejudice against color was actually a natural aversion to hybridizing thus giving white anti-miscegenation sentiment a ‘scientifically’ ground. Finally, the arguments became that the constitutional rights to freedom and equality, as well as other human rights, applied only to whites because blacks were not human. Thus the racist who wished to be a democrat could attack class distinctions in Europe because all Europeans were, but continue to segregate and oppress blacks at home.

Frederick I. Hoffman’s *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro* (1896) argues that blacks, doomed by innate weakness and vice, could never be uplifted by education or other means. Indeed, Dr. Paul B. Barringer of the University of Virginia stridently proclaimed the need for education but for strong control of blacks to prevent their reversion to savagery. Such arguments, later spread to mass audiences by Thomas Dixon, Jr., fueled the explosion of segregationist legislation and justified the rash of lynchings in the 1890s.

Because Jim Crow succeeded in rigid isolation of blacks as a group, it led to the problem of control over them; lynching became a powerful and necessary weapon of outside white control over the segregated black community. With the increasing brutality and the torturing and burning that became part of lynching’s after 1892, whites justified by crying rape, but even statistics kept at the time by white apologists for racism showed that no such crime or even charge of rape existed in the overwhelming majority of cases. Nonetheless the growing myth of the black man, as a genetic sexual monster fanned the Negrophobia of the 1890s, a myth encouraged by novelists such as Thomas Nelson Page and later trumpeted by Thomas Dixon, Jr. The social scientists believed that the Blacks are inferior by birth. Among Whites this belief in the genetic racial inferiority and the hereditary disposition of Blacks to disease, led inevitably to fear of interracial sex.

It is necessary to know in detail the origin of slavery had been the profit motive. Prior to 1793, little cotton was produced in the United States. In 1793, the cotton gin was invented. Henceforth it was profitable to raise short-staple cotton, and the appropriate soil and climate for this plant existed over a vast area, stretching from Georgia and South Carolina westwards as far as Texas. With the growth of the British Textile Industry, cotton growers were assured of a market for whatever they could produce. Cotton growing, moreover, was suited to slave-labor, which is more economical than wage-labor only under special conditions. It was possible to keep a slave on a cotton plantation, agriculture was revitalized and slavery began finally to be regarded not as an evil but as a positive good.

Old Virginia families were selling slaves and foodstuffs to the cotton states to avoid bankruptcy. This economy dependence was followed by political subordination, so that by the second quarter of the 19th century, Southern leadership belonged definitely to the cotton-growers, and the hegemony of the more liberal Virginia planters had come to an end. One of the most conspicuous aspects of Southern development after the rise of

cotton was the revival of slavery. An institution which in 1793 had few defenders and was widely believed to be approaching dissolution had come to be regarded, two generations later, as the very foundation of southern society. In some areas outside the cotton belt, especially in tide water Virginia and Maryland, planters had more slaves than they could profitably employ, and they were shipped southwards in large numbers. Southerners never had easy consciences about selling their slaves; and the business of trading in human beings was left to men of low character and social standing. The Negroes were in demand to work in the plantations there was an increase in their price. Before the invention of the cotton gin a young, able body's field hand could be bought for \$300 or \$400. In the 1850's the price some times rose to \$1, 500, or even above \$2,000 for a skilled crafts man. The total slave population increased from nearly 800,000 in 1790 to about 4,000,000 in 1860.

The change in the southern sentiment about slavery began to show itself in the 1820s. For the first time, political and intellectual leaders began to declare that slavery was not an evil but a positive good and to regard it not as a transitory institution which would be abolished at some future. In defending slavery, the southern leaders used arguments derived from religion, biology, history and Economics. They asserted that it was in accordance with the will of God as revealed in the Bible and quoted a few Biblical passages which appeared to justify. The whites tried to prove that the Negro race was congenitally inferior to the White race. They also pointed out that high civilizations in the past, like that of the ancient Greeks, had been based on slavery, and went on to argue that slavery provided the best system of economic organization.

Negroes were generally ill-treated. There were also instances of heartless cruelty. The Negroes had to live and toil under brutality and repression. More than all, they suffered the loss of basic right of every man to be free. Race discrimination became a dominant factor in the American society and the American ideal was not given its due. The Negroes were never permitted to move up the social ladder or become fully integrated into the American community. By the end of the 18th century Negro Americans had been segregated most effectively in the southern states where some 90 percent of them resided and these states seemed to view with one another in developing in genius segregation, legislation, practices. There were laws separating Negroes and Whites in factories, exits, entrances and toilets in public parks, drinking facilities, telephone booths, country jails, stockades, convict campus, institution for the insane, hospital and cemeteries. If Negroes frequented public auditorium, they occupied dark galleries to which they gained access by side or rear entrances. They were consigned to the basements of hospitals and to the least attractive portions of public parks. For them education was not only critical but indispensable, yet, public support of their segregated schools were the very epitome of discrimination. The view prevailed that virtually any expenditure on schools for Negroes was a waste not merely because Negroes were unable to learn anything important but also because the very effort would give Negroes false notions of their capacities and spoil them for their "place" in the society. Thus by 1916 the per capita expenditure for the education of white children in southern countries was \$1267 whereas it was \$3.90 for the education of the Negro children.

In the beginning of the twentieth century 90percent of the Negroes still lived in the south and more than 75 percent of them were engaged in agriculture. Most of the Negroes were not permitted to vote or sit on juries. A policy of segregation was enforced by law. The Negroes in the south went to different schools. But they were kept apart from the White people by Jim Crow rules. The facilities allotted to Negroes were far inferior. In the North Segregation was not very much encouraged. However, desegregation was enforced in practice by popular pressure especially in housing and access to job employment and educational opportunities to the Negroes were restricted. In addition to the material problems of poverty, they were burdened by the even more difficult problems of emotional adjustment to a society in which they were branded as inferior to all White people.

By the emancipation proclamation of 22nd September, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln abolished slavery in the United States. Subsequently the amendment was passed in December 1865 which constitutionally abolished slavery According to the amendment neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall exist in the United States. So the Negroes had all rights constitutionally. But in practice they were denied all rights through various indirect methods adapted by the Whites. Denying voting rights to the Negroes was prohibited by the 15th amendment (1870) which said: The rights of the United States to vote shall not be denied... on account of race, color or previous condition of servitude.

But the American White Society was slow in changing its attitude towards the black. Having been born and brought up in a slave owning community, Mark Twain understood all this. Like Lincoln, Mark Twain also wished to abolish slavery, and it is proper to call him as the Lincoln of Literature.

Twain is of the view that Lincoln's proclamations, not only set the black slaves free, but set the white men also free. According to Twain slavery seemed to have smothered the white conscience, robbed the white man's sense of self respect and turned the white man into an unchristian, undemocratic and inhuman tyrant; slavery particularly brutalized the slave-holder and removed his finer sensibilities if he had any. When woman slaves were stripped and whipped, when families were sold on the auction block, no protests came from the

families. Men and women had become so hardened by long familiarity with oppression that when a slave woman was lashed into unconsciousness, they commented only on the expert way in which the whip was handled. Twain observes succinctly: “this is what slavery could do in the way of ossifying what one may call the superior lobe of human feeling” (Twain 1980:210).

When a slave was killed by whipping, the spectators expressed sympathy only for the slave owner who had lost his valuable property. The laws of slavery were so stringent that even helping a runaway slave was a crime and a moral smirch. The pathetic condition of the slaves has been forcefully expressed by Richard Wright (1969:15):

Capacity under Christendom blasted our lives, disrupted our families down into the personalities of each one of us and it destroyed the very images and symbols which had guided our minds and feelings in the effort to live.

Twain minced no words in evaluating the inhumanity of slavery meant “Working a Negro to death”, and as its best it meant “a life of misery” As the mother in Langston Hughes’s poem, Mother to son (Foner 1958:260) puts it:

Well, son, I’ll tell you: Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair,
Its bad tacks in it, And Splinters,
And boards torn up And places with no carpet on the floor Bare.

Denying voting right to the Negroes was prohibited by the fifteenth amendment which said, “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied... on account of race, color or previous condition of servitude.” But that right was denied by southern states through indirect methods not openly contrary to the constitution. The Mississippi state led the way in 1890 with a law making payment of a poll tax eight months before the election a prerequisite for voting. In 1892 a literacy test was added, requiring every voter to be able to read and interpret part of the Federal Constitution. During the next decade similar laws were passed in every Southern state. The poll-tax requirements were deliberately made as complicated as possible, in order to discourage Negroes from playing it. The literacy test was even more effective in excluding Negroes from voting. Even Negroes with college degrees could be pronounced illiterate if they failed to answer difficult questions about the constitution. Thus the vast majority of the southern Negroes were legally prohibited from voting.

The Negroes were thus denied political rights and were branded as inherently inferior to all white men. The Negroes could not do anything to improve their position. About 55 percent of the total Negroes population were working on land which they did not own. In 1900 their living condition was better off than in 1860. Half of the southern Negroes were illiterate, and the death rate was nearly twice that of the white population.

The more restless and ambitious Negroes began to move into the cities. The twentieth century saw, a considerable migration of the Negroes into the North. But urban job opportunities were limited, since the better paid occupations were mostly held by white workers. Many trade unions excluded Negroes.

In general, Negroes were restricted to the mere menial and insecure occupations. The Negro who knew his place and remained dependent upon the white landlord or employer could usually hope for a considerable measure of security but any expression of initiative or ambition was dangerous to the Negro. The Jim Crow Laws, enacted in the Southern States between 1900 and 1911, kept the Negro population consistently aware of its inferior status. So also did the prevalence of lynching. This reached a peak during the political disturbances of the 1890’s with 292 cases in the 1892 alone. During the decade 1889-99 the total number of Negroes lynched was 1,460. Lynching’s dropped to 820 during the following ten – year period and continued to decrease thereafter. But it was never wholly eliminated.

In the beginning of the twentieth century 90 percent of the Negroes still lived in the south. Most of them engaged in agriculture. With a few exceptions, they were not permitted to vote, and a policy of segregation was enforced by law. Negroes in the south went to different schools and were kept apart from white people by Jim Crow rules. Theoretically the educational and especially in housing and access to jobs. Severely restricted in their employment and educational opportunities, Negroes suffered from great economic handicaps. The Negroes were undergoing not only material problems of poverty but also the problems of emotional adjustment to a society in which they were branded as inferior to all white people.

No regard was given to the Negroes’ emotions whatever. The children of slaves automatically became the property of their owner, like the young ones of a domestic animal. It was common sight to find the father on one farm and the mother on another, separated by a great distance where they could hardly think of meeting. Even the laws protected this inhuman institution. For example, in 1850 the American Congress passed the notorious Fugitive Slave law, which protected the right of the owner to get the runaway nigger apprehended and punished. The slaves could not assemble, and could have no meeting except then a White man was present. One shudders to think or visualize this ‘material law’ against the slaves. Whenever a ‘nigger’ became fugitive, weeklies and newspaper carried the advertisement, and when apprehended they were given exemplary

punishment, whipping in public was common. In some case the slaves used to be branded with hot iron. A North Carolina judge said that there were many acts which might constitute the legally punishable crime of 'insolence' by a black man : It might merely be 'a look' the pointing of a finger, a refusal or negelect to step out of the way when a white person is seem to approach. He continued, that each of such acts violates the rules of propriety, and if tolerated, would destroy that subordinate up on the social system rest. (As quoted in stamp 1956:208).Stamp (ibid: 153) says:

Illegally all white man was authorized to size runaways; some of them, tempted by the rewards were willing to pay, made a profession out of it. Poor white men habitually kept their eyes open for strange Negroes without passes, for the apprehension of a fugitive was financial wind fall.

The enslaved blacks were apart from land, the most valuable commodities in the southern economy. 'Commodity' is probably the right word to use here, since there were regions of the U.S.A special ling in the breeding and exporting of saleable bodies for the sugar and cotton-growing plantations in the deep south .That is they were engaged in slave production and marketing, in producing slaves as commodities. Slave families were split and sold to different masters' .William W.Brown (1847:27-28), himself a fugitive slave, wrote in his memoir:

Though slavery is thought, by some, to be mild in Missouri, when compared with the cotton, sugar and rice growing states, yet no part of our slave holding country, is more noted for the barbarity of its inhabitants, than St.Louis. It was here that Co. Harney, a United States officer, whipped a slave woman to death. It was here that Francis McIntosh, a free colored man from Pittsburgh, was taken from the steam boat Flora and burned at the stake. A few weeks after, on our downward passage, the boat took on board, at Hannibal, a drove of slaves, bound for the New Orleans market. They numbered from fifty to sixty, consisting of men and women from eighteen to forty years of age. A drove of slaves on a Southern steam boat, bound for the cotton or sugar regions, is an occurrence so common, that no one, not even the passengers, appear to notice it , though they clank their chains of every step.

The attitude of the whites towards the Negroes during and after the Second World War has changed a lot. They realized that as long as the United States practiced color discrimination in the U.S.A., the claim to be the Champion of freedom abroad would be regarded in other countries as blatantly hypocritical. Another influential factor was the growing importance of the Negro votes in several large Northern States.

The judicial and executive branches of the federal Government were ready to help the Negroes. Therefore, during the 1950's Negro leaders made bolder moves to secure their civil rights. They demonstrated some impressively orderly and well – organized protests against discrimination. There was growing resistance to the Jim Crow laws still enforced in the Southern States. Notable among them was prolonged boycott of the local bus system by the Negro population of the city of Montgomery, in the State of Alabama. In April 1956, the Supreme Court affirmed that enforced segregation in all public transportation, intra state as well as interstate, was unconstitutional. On May 27, 1954, the Supreme Court said by a, unanimous judgment that segregation in the public schools was a violation of the legal equality guaranteed to all citizens, by the fourteenth Amendment. The Court further said that the Southern states should begin moving towards the abolition of segregation in schools. Slowly there is a progress in this field. Unemployment remained far higher amount Negroes than among whites. All the American presidents, irrespective of their party affiliations supported the Negro causes.

Martin Luther King's leadership was effective; King won supporters even from the white population. But now color discrimination no longer threatens the peace and progress of the U.S.A, All the Negroes enjoy all the rights guaranteed by constitution. This is because of the awakening sense created among both white and black by the creative writing of men like Mark Twain.

Abraham Lincoln had abolished slavery by law, but the laws could hardly change the attitude of the white community. They still held the Negroes in contempt and never gave them any respectable treatment or place in society. Change of hearts was the need. The cure for all the social evils lies in the contempt of human love- love between man and man, black and white and between individual and the society.

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