

African Americans: Their Origin and Social status in the United States of America

Dr. Kalpana Sargar

**Assistant Professor & Head, Department of English, Barns College of Arts, Science and
Commerce, New Panvel, (M.S.) India**

Abstract

African American as a community has a very complex and pathetic history in the United States of America which cannot be justified on any of the grounds. These are the people of African origin who were forcefully brought to the shores of America during the period of slave-trade. However, it has to be taken into consideration that Africans were not being treated as slaves when a ship brought a group of about twenty Africans to Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. The records indicate that this first group of Africans were the contractual servants who were made to work for their masters for a certain period of time before they were allowed to lead a free life.

Keywords: African Americans, Negro, black, USA

African American as a community has a very complex and pathetic history in the United States of America which cannot be justified on any of the grounds. These are the people of African origin who were forcefully brought to the shores of America during the period of slave-trade. However, it has to be taken into consideration that Africans were not being treated as slaves when a ship brought a group of about twenty Africans to Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. The records indicate that this first group of Africans were the contractual servants who were made to work for their masters for a certain period of time before they were allowed to lead a free life. Though there is no much historical record available which states what exactly happened to these Africans, it is sure that their arrival to America:

marked the beginning of an atrocious trend in colonial America, in which the people of Africa were taken unwillingly from their motherland and consigned to lifelong slavery.

The robust economic growth of the English colonies was caused largely by this exploitative institution.

This journey of the free Africans from different parts of Africa to the wretched life of slavery in the United States was one of the most agonizing events in the history not only of America but in the history of mankind itself as these people were not being considered as humans at all. This atrocious attitude of the European settlers towards the people of African origin was the consequence of their falsely upheld sense of racial superiority. Due to their ill-placed racial pride, the European settlers treated the Africans in the most brutal manner that has remained unmatched in the world history. It is observed that the Whites did not regard the Negroes as human beings at all having human qualities. This attitude of the Whites is mentioned by Leibowitz when he says that the White Americans considered the Negroes:

... scarcely more than chattel or animals, to be taunted, manipulated,

humiliated at will, and kept in their place at the bottom of society. Crossing the colour line was an offence seldom tolerated and often severely punished.

However, this journey of free Africans to the life of bonded slaves was never smooth for both the Settlers as well as the newcomer Africans. It witnessed several ups and downs, overcame numerous obstacles, and ultimately took deep roots in the American soil. Though the treatment given to the Africans had some relation to the sense of racial superiority, the main cause of its getting firmly established in America was economic. During the initial years of their establishment, the economy of the new colonies was mainly dependent on agriculture. The settlers required a good number of labour forces to work on the plantations. Initially this workforce primarily consisted of the European indentured servants who had come to the New Land on their own by selling their labour for a fixed period of time in exchange of the cost of their passage, upkeep and training. But this workforce was not enough to meet the huge requirement of the agricultural industry. The attempts were made to supplement the number by forcing the Native Americans to work for the European Settlers. However, it was a difficult task as the Natives were well-united and had knowledge of all the possible means of escape from the clutches of slavery. This labour crunch led the Settlers to explore the alternative options resulting in the slave trade. The merchants and adventurers initiated the brutal trade of human trafficking first by buying the Africans in exchange of goods and then kidnapping them. These Africans were brought to the unknown shores of America

and sold there to the European farmers who forced them to work beyond their physical capacity to earn huge profits. This economic consideration led to the geometrical increase in the number of Africans in America. The early records indicate that the number of Africans present in Virginia in 1625 was just 23, which increased to about 300 within a span of 25 years.

Soon the slavery got institutionalized in the United States of America, particularly in the Southern part of the country. In Virginia, it was legally institutionalized in 1640, when the court officially declared 'at least one African' as slave. During the next 100 years, the slave trade flourished with about a thousand Africans being brought in the country every year. This increase in the number of slaves gave rise to various familial, social, economic, and political issues that kept American government in constant conflict with both the slaves and the slave-owners. The history has numerous proofs which indicate that this practice of slavery was not whole-heartedly accepted by the Africans. The victims of this cruel system expressed their disapproval against slavery by various means that included both violent as well as non-violent means of protest. Perhaps, the most prominent of the violent protests was led by Nat Turner in August 1831. In Southampton County, Virginia, Turner led a group of '75 blacks that murdered some 60 whites in two days'. However, Turner could not succeed in his attempt to free his people as the military was called in to suppress the revolt. This violent revolt resulted in strengthening the system of the slavery as the:

Supporters of slavery pointed to Turner's rebellion as evidence that blacks were inherently inferior

barbarians requiring an institution such as slavery to discipline them, and fears of similar insurrections led many southern states to further strengthen their slave codes in order to limit the education, movement and assembly of slaves.

However, now it was impossible to douse the freedom fire as the Africans had determined to breathe the air of freedom. They strengthened their efforts by getting united and fighting the war against the dreadful enemy with renewed energy. The socio-political upheavals in this process of emancipation of slaves and equality for all were dotted with numerous similar protest movements which finally resulted in the passing and adapting the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1965 that made all slaves free and equal citizens of America. However, it has to be understood that this Amendment was the end of slavery only as a legal institution. It does not mean that the war against the racial discrimination has ended. There have been many instances of racial discrimination taking place in one or the other part of the country. A report on the Hate Crimes recently released by the Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Government of America, reveals that the percentage of 'Racial Crimes is 48.5 % in the year 2013'. This figure is an eye-opener which speaks volumes about the status of Africans and other racial minorities in America.

When one looks at the history of the origin of the term 'African American' commonly used to refer to the people of African descent, it becomes clear that the term has its own history with diverse socio-political and cultural connotations. During the course of their existence in the U.S., these

people were referred with different names like negro, nigger, black, and African. The English word 'Negro' is:

a derivative of the Spanish and Portuguese word *negro*, which means black... Within a short time, the Portuguese word *negro* (no capital) became the English noun-adjective "negro." This word, which was not capitalized at first, fused not only humanity, nationality and place of origin but also certain white judgements about the inherent and irredeemable inferiority of the persons so designated.

With the passing of the time, African Americans started using the capital letter 'N' to replace the letter 'n' in the word 'negro'. The change was the consequence of the argument put forward by the African American intellectuals who opposed the connotations of slavery inherent in the name 'negro'. So the word 'Negro' started to gain acceptance from many people and organizations. However, there were also some scholars who opposed the use of the term 'Negro' to refer to the people of African descent. According to these scholars:

the word *Negro* had no significance as to color, but could only be used in a reproachful or degrading sense, and he further declared that no man on that floor knew where the-term originated, since it was not found in ancient history, inspired or profane.

The word 'black' means 'belonging to or denoting any human group having dark-coloured skin, especially of African or Australian Aboriginal ancestry'. Along with the term 'Negro', some scholars like Adam Clayton Powell and Malcolm X,

preferred to use the word 'black' to refer to the African Americans, which in fact, was the result of 'a general crisis of identity'. For some time it was accepted by the people. But this transition from 'Negro' to 'black' had to face many social upheavals. People got engaged in serious deliberations regarding the propriety of such a change. In this respect, Goings says:

"It was a generational transition. It really happened with younger people who saw Dr. King as someone not as in touch with African Americans as they thought. Indeed, the term "black" came to prominence coinciding with the rise of Malcolm X and the phrase "Black is Beautiful."

This was a period when African Americans asserted their identity and took pride in being 'Black' as for them 'Black' was 'Beautiful'. However, there was a study called the Doll Study conducted by Kenneth B. Clark which showed that the school-children including the Black ones are culturally conditioned as they selected 'white doll' in preference to the 'black doll'. The concept of beauty was relative in which the 'White' was considered to be the symbol of beauty and the 'Black' that of ugliness. Therefore many critics criticized the use of the word 'Black' to refer to the African Americans and suggested the word 'colored' as it seems to have no specific reference to the derogatory system of slavery. This word was preferred by many middle-class African Americans.

It is interesting to note here that there were educated activists in African American community who were happy to call themselves as 'Africans' since the early days of slavery itself. They did not like their being called 'Negroes' on the contrary,

'they referred to themselves as 'blacks,' 'blackes,' and 'Africans'. Following this preference, they designated their institutions with the inclusion of the word, 'African,' in their names. E.g. their institutions were called 'The Free African Society,' 'the African Methodist Episcopal Church,' and 'The African Baptist Church.' But they had to give up this name and opt for the term 'colored' as at the beginning of the 19th century, American Colonization Society started a movement of sending the free Africans back to Africa. Consequently the members of this community were forced to take the nomenclature of 'colored' and/or 'free persons of colour.' When some leaders of this community tried to suggest the term 'oppressed Americans' in favour of 'colored' Americans, their advice was rejected by the more militant leaders of their community. In a reaction to this suggestion, Samuel Cornish retorted by saying that:

"Oppressed Americans?.. Who are they? Nonsense brethren! You are COLORED AMERICANS. The Indians are RED AMERICANS, and the white people are WHITE AMERICANS and *you are as good as they, and they are no better than you.*"

Due to the overwhelming support of the leaders, the term 'colored' got prominence and was used by the people up to the beginning of the twentieth century. It does not mean that it was equally accepted by all the intellectuals throughout the country. Of course, there were opponents, some of them very prominent like Frederick Douglass, who voted for the word 'Negro'.

With the turn of the twentieth century there came a change in the outlook of the

American people in general and African American people in particular with regard to the use of the appropriate term to refer to the people of African descent. There had started a movement to adopt the term 'Afro-American' or 'African American with or without hyphen. According to the proponents of this term, 'the word 'Negro' is an inaccurate epithet which perpetuates the master-slave mentality in the minds of both black and white Americans' and so its use should be discarded. Following this, many organizations like the American Federation of Teachers passed a decree to use the term 'Afro-American'. In the Conference on Racism in Education, all the participants 'unanimously endorsed a resolution which called on all educators, persons, and organizations to abandon the "slavery-imposed name" "Negro" for the terms "African American" or "Afro-American."

The word 'African American' was preferred as the people thought that it was the most appropriate choice to refer to the descendants of Africans who were Americans as well. In this respect Dick Edwards says that:

There is a cringing from the word 'Negro,' especially by the young, because of the oppression into which we were born, and because that name was imposed on us. There seems to be violent objection to the term among young people, who link the word

'Negro' with Uncle Tom. They seldom use the word 'Negro.'

Whatever may be the case, one thing has to be accepted that only the change in name will not bear any fruits unless all the African Americans as well as the White Americans change their attitude towards each other. This is exactly opined by Dr. Benjamin Quarles when he writes:

One's estimation of himself takes many forms. There are levels of sophistication on which you voice your protest and make clear your identity. For some people, the best way they can make clear their identity is by denying the word 'Negro' which, traditionally, they say, is a slave-oriented name. Other people may prefer what they would consider more sophisticated techniques of projecting their identity. But, nevertheless, you have to grant that it may be necessary for certain individuals to avoid the name 'Negro.' I wouldn't quarrel with them. Nevertheless, I would not myself stop using the word 'Negro,' because I see nothing wrong with it. Words change in their context. We have many words historically that once were terms of denigration... I believe you will begin to see the same evolution of the word 'Negro' as Americans of African descent move into their rightful place in American society.

References:

1. <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3406400017.html>
2. Leibowitz, Harbert: 1993. "Arise Ye Pris'ners of Starvation": Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and *American Hunger*," in Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present, ed. Henry Louis Gates. New York: Amisted Press, P. 43.

3. <http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/slavery>
4. <https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/latest-hate-crime-statistics-report-released>
5. [http://www.virginia.edu/woodson/courses/aas102%20\(spring%2001\)/articles/names/bennett.htm](http://www.virginia.edu/woodson/courses/aas102%20(spring%2001)/articles/names/bennett.htm)
6. Lerone Bennett, Jr. 'What's In a Name? Negro vs. Afro-American vs. Black.' *Ebony* 23 (November 1967): 46-48, 50-52, 54.
7. https://www.google.co.in/?gfe_rd=cr&ei=SYW1V97HEbTv8wfTw7vwCw#q=the+meaning+of+black
8. <http://www.africaspeaks.com/reasoning/index.php?topic=1335.0;wap2>
9. [http://www.virginia.edu/woodson/courses/aas102%20\(spring%2001\)/articles/names/bennett.htm](http://www.virginia.edu/woodson/courses/aas102%20(spring%2001)/articles/names/bennett.htm)
10. [http://www.virginia.edu/woodson/courses/aas102%20\(spring%2001\)/articles/names/bennett.htm](http://www.virginia.edu/woodson/courses/aas102%20(spring%2001)/articles/names/bennett.htm)
11. Rose Peter I. Ed. *Americans from America: Old Memories New Moods, Vol-2*. New Brunswick: Aldine Transactions. Second Printing 2009. P.381.