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Voices of Survival: A Collective Study of Marginalization and Subjugation of African American Slaves

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Abstract— *The article examines the marginalization and subjugation of slaves under the system of American slavery. The nature of American slavery was multidimensional; it was not only a system of forced labour but also a system of oppression that included social, economic, political, and cultural exploitation of the slaves. The institution of American slavery pushed African American slaves to the margins of society, and simultaneously the system of subjugation controlled their autonomy. These dual perspectives of oppression, marginalization, and subjugation cannot be separated from the history of slavery. Marginalization explains how Americans were systematically excluded from social, economic, and political structures of American society, while subjugation explains the mechanisms through which their lives and behaviour were controlled. Through analysis of autobiographical narratives of slaves and the history of slavery, the article explores how marginalization and subjugation were used as tools of domination.*

Keywords— ***Marginalization, subjugation, slave, slavery, slave narrative.***

Introduction

The institution of slavery dominated millions of people throughout history. Slavery began to fill labour shortages in agriculture, but it gradually became a significant part of economic development. Slavery began in America with the colonization of the land, and its form and nature were different from ancient slavery. American slavery was a multidimensional system of oppression, including economic exploitation, social exclusion, political domination, cultural displacement, and racial discrimination. The institutions of American slavery were profit-oriented; white people pushed African American slaves to the margins of society, and the system of subjugation controlled their lives through forced labour and physical violence.

> Slavery is one form of exploitation. Its special characteristics include the idea that slaves are property; that they are outsiders who are alien by origin or who are denied their heritage through judicial or other sanctions; that coercion can be used at will; that their labour power is at the complete disposal of a master; that they do not have the right to their own sexuality and, by extension, to their own reproductive capacities; and that the slave status is inherited unless provision is made to ameliorate that status. (Lovejoy, 1)

The term "Marginality" is generally used to describe and analyse social, economic, and political spheres, where deprived sections of society struggle to gain equal access to participation in social activity and to their identity as social beings. Marginalization is a social process by which a person or a community is made marginal in society. Robert Park, an American sociologist and one of the founders of the Chicago School, first used the term "marginality" in his article, *Human Migration and Marginal Man*,1928. He believed that the process of marginalization involves pushing certain individuals or groups to the periphery of society, which ultimately restricts

their ability to make decisions about their lives in the political, social, and economic spheres.

> He was a man on the margin of two cultures and two societies, which never completely interpenetrated and fused. Ordinarily, the marginal man is of mixed blood, like the Mulatto in the United States or the Eurasian in Asia, but that is apparently because the man of mixed blood lives in worlds in both of which he is more or less of a stranger. (Park. 892-893).

On the other hand, subjugation represents the process through which an individual or group of people are dominated, controlled, exploited, and denied their rights of freedom and opportunities by some other more powerful institution, system, or groups of people. It is not only associated with physical control of the individual but also frames their identity, ideology, and marginalizes them from the centre of society. Michel Foucault gave the concept of Subjugation in his essay *The Subject and Power* 1982. His concept of subjugation is deeply connected with power. He writes, "it is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word "subject": subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to"(781).

In this context, some historians argue that slavery, marginalization, and subjugation are a social process. Each aspect directly affects society and the life of the individual. Therefore, marginalization and subjugation of slaves were common practices during slavery in every civilisation. Every ancient and modern civilization feels proud of its history and the evolution of its civilization. All the world's great civilizations were built by slaves' labour. They glorify the development of civilization but ignore the dark side of slavery.

Marginalization of Slaves

Social Marginalization

During American slavery, African American slaves were socially marginalized; their social activity was controlled by slave holders. The social structure was dismantled during slavery; there was no concept of an organized society. People were divided into two different classes: capitalist and working class. The capitalist class owned productive resources, while the working class depended on selling its labour for survival. The owners weakened the social and economic structure of the slaves so that they remained struggling for their survival and never thought about revolt against the system of slavery. They destroyed the family structure of the slaves; they were forcefully separated from one another. "To be a man, and not to be a man, a father without authority, a husband and no protector is the darkest of fates"(Jacob 96).

Due to a lack of social organization and the slave trade, slaves often moved from one place to another, which made their population minor wherever they migrated. The migrant Africans not only faced cultural and religious suppression but also faced various forms of marginalisation, including poverty, racial discrimination, and alienation that affected their overall well-being. Orlando Patterson, in his book *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study, writes,* "If the slave no longer belongs to a community, if he had no social existence outside of his master, then what was he? The initial response in almost all slaveholding societies was to define the slave as a socially dead person" (38). Enslaved African Americans were denied the ability to shape or choose their environment; instead, they were consigned to landscapes that drained their strength and limited their lives.

Erasing Native Identity.

In the process of social marginalization, the white slave owners used different methods to erase Black Africans' social and religious identity. Branding of the slaves was the first step, which began on the African coast, where European traders marked captives before transporting them across the Middle Passage. African slaves were treated as objects, and branding served the same function as marking livestock or goods. It also reinforced the commodification of human beings, stripping their individuality and giving them the status of property that could be bought and sold in the market like an ox. The slaves were branded by hot irons with the initial letters of their master's name, just as merchants branded their goods to signify ownership and prevent theft. Sometimes slaves wore an iron collar on which the master's name was printed, which demonstrated the authority of the white over the slaves. Merchants and plantation owners justified branding as necessary for economic efficiency, but in reality, it was a brutal act of dehumanization. Branding thus became a symbol of the cruelty of slavery, a visible scar that testifies to the violence of the system of American slavery.

Replacing African names with Christian names was another process to remove their social identity. Renaming of the enslaved was not limited to erasing their identity but also undermined the spiritual significance and connections to heritage and community. Olaudah Equiano explains in his narrative that his name was changed several

times during enslavement. His original name, which was given by his parents, was OLAUDAH, which means in his language a fortunate, well-spoken man with a loud voice. But after his kidnapping during the Middle Passage, the captain of this ship called him Michael, and when he reached Virginia, he was called Jacob. But when Captain Michael Henry Pascal bought him, he gave him a new name, Gustavus Vassa. When he refused to answer to his new name, he was threatened and flogged by his master. In his article, George E. Boulukos discusses the complexity of his identity. "As his two names, and his story having been kidnapped as a child in Africa, demonstrate, his identity was undeniably multifaceted"(241). Although Equiano's identity was shaped by African, African-American, and British influences, he existed in a complex space between them, but never fully belonging to any single one of them, which shows his marginalization.

Denial of Education and Informational Control:

Education for the slaves in America was legally prohibited during slavery. Plantation owners purchased slaves for work, not to educate them. Enslaved people had to face many challenges to gain education under the system of slavery. There were no schools where slaves got formal education, where they learned how to solve mathematical sums and developed their understanding in different subjects. In his narrative, Henry Bibb tells that there were no schools for the Black enslaved people. They spent their free time playing and fighting; they were also denied religious instruction at all. Slaves were not allowed books, pen, ink, nor paper to improve their minds. "Slave owners had fear that literacy would promote excessive independence among slaves; most slaves' owners opposed teaching their people to read or allowing them to attend Sunday school"(Kolchin 116). In his narrative, Solomon Northup explains that the system of American slavery was profit-centred, and no slave holder was ready to spend money to educate their slaves. "He said he wanted me to understand that he bought "niggers" to work and not to educate"(Northup 230). Thus, prevention of education was not incidental; it was a significant mechanism for maintaining the system of subjugation.

Race and Colour Discrimination

Race refers to a group of people who share similar biological and genetic features. While the term has biological overtones, it has virtually nothing to do with biology and everything to do with society. American slavery was fundamentally racial in nature; African American slaves were deliberately discriminated against based on their skin colour. Even though "race" and "colour" refer to two different kinds of human characteristics, in America it is the visibility of skin colour-and of other physical traits associated with particular colours or groups-that marks individuals as "targets" for subordination by members of the white majority. Solomon Northup represents racism as like other forms of servitude. He shares his experiences that American slavery was hereditary and permanent, ensuring that race became the defining marker of social exclusion. This racial discrimination was not incidental but played a significant role in the justification of slavery, embedding discrimination into the very fabric of American society. "He looked upon the black man simply as an animal, differing in no respect from any other animal, save in the gift to speech and the possession of somewhat higher instincts, and, therefore, the more valuable"(Northup 261). According to Jean R. Soderlund, the tendency of white people to exploit Africans as slaves was rooted in ethnocentrism, hierarchical beliefs, and prejudice against blackness. White people assumed that dark-skinned people were inferior and suitable for enslavement. Hence their dark skin colour was seen as a tool for the visible badge of enslavement.

Economic Marginalization

An individual's central or marginal status in society depends on his economic security. The denial of property rights was one of the major strategies adopted by slave owners through which they marginalized enslaved people. Under the system of slavery in the United States of America, enslaved people were legally denied social and property rights. The denial of property rights deprived enslaved people of economic independence and made them dependent upon their owners for necessities. Enslaved people could not legally own land, homes, or businesses, nor could they accumulate wealth through wages. They had no other way to earn money except by hiring themselves out to either the same owner or some other planters. But if the slave belongs to the master and is hired out for work, then the money from the labour of the slave belongs to the master. Solomon Northup tells that during slavery, he was hired out by his master to earn money, and then the money was taken by his masters. According to the laws of chattel slavery, he was the property of his master, and all his earnings belonged to his master. "I was his faithful slave, and earned him large wages every day"(Northup 107). The laws were constructed in such a way that a slave could not get his freedom easily.

Henry Bibb describes how enslaved people were forced to work eighty to twenty hours on tobacco, sugar, and cotton plantations without wages. This exploitation created a legacy of poverty that persisted after slavery ended. "It was then I first commenced seeing and feeling

that I was a wretched slave, compelled to work under the lash without wages, and often without clothes enough to hide my nakedness. I have often worked without enough to eat, both late and early, by day and by night"(Bibb 15). The denial of property rights and paid labour also contributed to a legacy of unemployment. Thus, the white slaveholders blocked all the possible ways to earn money for enslaved people.

Denial of property rights and paid employment created a legacy of poverty. It is reasonable to think that the man on whose back the economy was dependent faced hunger, poverty, and unemployment. The enslaved people lived in poverty; they did not have enough money to buy clothes to cover their naked bodies or surplus food for their hunger. In his narrative, Olaudah Equiano tells, "I grant, indeed, that slaves are sometimes, by half-feeding, half-clothing, over working, and stripes, reduced so low, that they are turned out as unfit for service, and left to perish in the woods, or expire on a dunghill"(130). These situations of the slaves demonstrate they were economically marginalized.

Political Marginalization

During American slavery, the white slaveholders used political marginalization as a mechanism through which they excluded African American enslaved people from the political sphere. The political power in the hands of white people perpetuated economic exploitation and social subjugation, ensuring that power remained under their control. Political marginalization indirectly increases the power of one group of people. If we talk about the rights of the slaves, then the system of slavery was itself against the law because it is a condition in which people are controlled by others against their will, and a slave by law is considered property of his master. The white people were owners of land, wealth, and laws, while the slaves were legally defined as chattel, movable property to be bought and sold in the market.

Slaves had no equal rights to freedom even after legal emancipation from slavery. Free blacks were always in danger of losing their freedom. Freeborn and ex-slaves were constantly challenged to prove that they were not slaves. Solomon Northup explains his own life experience: how, through conspiracy, he was kidnapped by two white slave hunters. According to his narrative, he was born free in the town of Minerva, Essex County. But in 1841, at the age of 32, Merrill Brown and Abram Hamilton not only kidnapped him but also took him by force. "I felt my pockets so far as the fetters would allow- far enough, to ascertain that I had not only been robbed of liberty, but that my money and free papers were also gone"(38). Olaudah Equiano also tells that in Jamaica and other islands, free enslaved people were trepanned and were kept in bondage. This shows that after emancipation, the life of enslaved people was not secure because there was no law to protect the freedom of the Black African enslaved. The law of justice was paradoxical; slaves and white people were not punished similarly for the same crimes. Black people were often whipped, killed, raped, and kidnapped by white people, but they were not punished, which shows there were two different laws for the people who existed in the same society.

Cultural Marginalization

Suppression of African culture was an important part of the process of social exclusion and domination of the enslaved people. Slaveholders attempted to weaken enslaved people's culture, identity, traditions, languages, family structures, religious practice, and connections with African heritage. African culture was oral; through music, dance, and stories, they transferred their culture to the next generation. African rhythms and songs were often suppressed, while enslaved Africans struggled to preserve their fragmented culture, song, dance, and identity through creativity. The slaveholders used physical and psychological techniques to dominate and suppress African culture. Slaveholders restricted public gatherings, drum beating, dancing, or gathering in a large group in burial ceremonies because they feared it might be the cause of rebellion. They passed laws under which enslaved people could not perform African culture without permission; if they did so, they would be punished.

African music and dance were not only for entertainment but also a way to pass culture from one generation to the next, but gradually the music and musical instruments were lost among African American slaves as they played European instruments. The loss of musical instruments and dancers shows they lost their culture, which could have played a significant role in their freedom. Solomon Northup played piano for income, which shows he left behind his ancestors' music. African music preserved African culture for centuries; after the colonial period, it was lost, and modern music and dance took its place. European music and dance became a source of income for enslaved people.

Suppression of the native African language was another dimension of cultural marginalization. All the colonies of the United States deliberately imposed foreign languages on African slaves. The loss of native language means the loss of oral traditions, stories, and cultural memory, deepening the dislocation of identity. When African slaves arrived in America through the transatlantic

slave trade, they brought with them their languages, dialects, and oral traditions. These languages carried histories, cosmologies, and cultural identities that were deeply embedded in African societies. "Indigenous languages are not simply forms of communication; they represent entire worldviews, philosophies, and cultural knowledge passed down through generations. Many Indigenous languages are oral traditions where stories, histories, and wisdom are passed on verbally rather than written down"(Lahoti, 59). But after their arrival, they were systematically denied the right to speak their native languages.

Slaveholders understood that language was a source of unity and resistance; by suppressing African languages and enforcing English, they sought to dismantle communal bonds and prevent collective organization. In his narrative, Equiano tells that when he was with local African slave traders, he did not feel marginalized because they spoke the same language; when he reached Virginia County, he found the African people spoke different languages to him, and he could not find anyone with whom he could talk. He says, "I was now exceedingly miserable, and thought myself worse off than any of the rest of my companions; for they could talk to each other, but I had no person to speak to that I could understand. In this state I was constantly grieving and pining, and wishing for death rather than anything else." (Equiano 62). The captive who came directly from Africa feels marginalized because he could not express his feelings and ideas to others. Language differences create barriers in the process of communication and social organisation, and that was the reason the African American people were enslaved for hundreds of years under the suppression of white people.

Religion played a significant role in legitimizing colonial empowerment. As Christians, all the colonists turned to the Bible to justify their prejudices. The Christian missionaries taught the African enslaved story of Ham, the son of Noah, as the father of African people. Many scholars and historians claim that the meaning of the word "Ham" in Hebrew is "black" or "hot". For a long period of time, it was taught that blacks are descendants of Ham; in other words, descendants of Ham are born to be slaves (Goldenberg, 2003). The biblical story tells about Noah and his three sons Shem, Japheth, and Ham. Noah was angry with his youngest son Ham and cursed him to be a slave of slaves. "…this identification became a crucial element in later deprecatory attitudes toward the Black, for when the ancestor of all Blacks is said to have been divinely cursed with slavery, the Curse of Ham is born" (Goldenberg, 144). According to many interpretations of the Bible by white preachers, men with black skin were predestined to be slaves. They used their fear as a tool of domination; they presented a different narrative among the slaves. They spread misbelief among the slaves' community about hell and heaven. They say, "servants be obedient to your masters; and he that knows his master's will and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes; this means that God sends them to hell if they disobey their masters" (Bibb 24).

In his narrative, Olaudah Equiano describes when he was an attendant of his master's sister, the servant of that lady, told him he would not go to heaven unless he was baptized. The white slaveholders frightened black people, saying that if they did not accept Christianity, they would not go to heaven after death. They easily believed that there was a life after death in heaven or hell. For slaves, hell was their life on the earth, suffering under the supremacy of white slaveholders. Slaves believed that if they survived hell during their lives, they would get to heaven. Their misfortune strengthened their faith, and some slaveholders allowed their slaves to listen to stories from the Bible on Sundays. As it was mentioned, some slaveholders used this way to force slaves to obey them, or they only provided them with religious information.

Subjugation of slaves

Family Separation

Family separation was a common and one of the most devastating forms of systematic violence. practice during American slavery. Millions of African American enslaved people were separated from their families through the Atlantic and domestic slave trade. The slave traders and slave holders used family separation as a mechanism to control slaves physically and psychologically. After being separated from their family, enslaved people not only faced psychological or emotional trauma in their lives but also were cut off from their culture and tradition. Slaves were deliberately separated from their families because it helped the owner to control them easily so that they could exploit them without any resistance. The fragmentation of enslaved families was socially and economically profitable for both slave owners and the slave traders. When they were sold separately to different owners according to their age and gender, they got a higher price for each slave, and the owner easily got control over them. "When slaves were sold, families were often divided- husband from wife, parents from children- with little regard given to keeping a family together if higher profits were possible by selling them separately" (Sylvester 145). Parents were helpless because they had no legal rights to protect their children who were sold away, and enslaved families were regularly and easily

separated at an owner's or auctioneer's whim, never to see each other again.

Olaudah Equiano, Austin Steward, and Charles Ball explain in their narrative how African people were forcefully captured from Africa and sold into slavery in America. Sometimes they were captured by their own people, and sometimes white people directly attacked African tribes and captured them. Olaudah Equiano tells how he was kidnapped by local African slave traders with his sister and separated from his family. According to his narrative, he was born free in the Igbo village of Essaka, South Nigeria, in the kingdom of Benin. "Kidnapping, as distinct from capturing in war, was a more individual operation. Its targets were usually unprotected strangers and children. It gave rise to a specialized "man-stealing" profession, which continued in Nigeria long after the End of the slave trade"(Meister, 125).

Slaves were not only kidnapped from Africa, but free African American slaves were also kidnapped through conspiracy and sold into slavery. Solomon Northup was a free black man, but he was kidnapped by two men, Merrill Brown and Abram Hamilton, and sold into slavery for twelve years. Feeling like a free man, he faced the trauma of slavery because of the power of white people all over the colonies and his voice being suppressed by them. The white slaveholder threatened and punished him. He says, "If ever I dared to utter again that I was entitled to my freedom, that I had been kidnapped, or any other thing whatever of the kind, the castigation I had just received was nothing in comparison with what would follow me. He swore that he would either conquer or kill me"(46). Slaves born in North America also had to suffer the stigma of subjugation from childhood. Except for kidnapping, slaves were sold from the North to Southern plantations where slave demand was so high. Their families could hardly save them from separation and the hardships of slave life. Charles Ball, Henry Bibb, and Austin Steward were born to enslaved mothers, and according to the law of slavery, their master had full rights over their body and life; they could buy and sell them.

Denial of Human Rights

Human rights are basic standards of living without which people can't live a life of dignity; all human beings are free to exercise their skills, talents, and inspirations. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* defines the main purpose of human rights as: Every individual has the right to use his intellect, skill, and inspiration to fulfil his physical, mental, social, economic, and spiritual needs- in a word, to enable himself to lead a life of human dignity. During American slavery, the laws and institutions were paradoxical, sustaining colonists' development while controlling the slaves' rights, such as the right to equality, freedom, justice, protection, and the right to human treatment, etc.

There was vast inequality between the lives of the masters and slaves throughout the history of slavery; slaves were always kept at the bottom of the social hierarchy and discriminated against based on their race, gender, and colour. This inequality was not incidental but deliberate, designed to perpetuate a system of dominance that ensured the prosperity of the few at the expense of the many. The social, political, and economic status of the slaves was not equal to that of their masters. They were treated as non-human, stripped of their humanity and fundamental rights. The separation of the slaves from their families shows that slaves had no rights, even over their families. They were sold in the market like animals. They had no freedom of choice; they could not freely decide where to live, whom to marry, what work to perform, or how to plan their futures. Slaves' lives were controlled by their master, who claimed authority over them. They treated enslaved people as property, denied their individuality, and ignored their feelings, ambitions, and personal relationships. The denial of personal autonomy also affected the psychological lives of enslaved people. Constant surveillance, the threat of punishment, and the possibility of separation created fear and insecurity.

Forced Labour

Under the system of slavery, beyond marginalization, enslaved people faced multiple forms of physical subjugation, and forced labour was one of them. Enslaved people worked for long hours on the plantations, farms, and in households, but the product of their labour legally belonged to their masters. Enslaved people were compelled to perform gruelling agricultural labour in cotton, rice, and sugar plantations under harsh conditions. "It was usual for men and women to work side by side on our plantation; and in many kinds of work, the women were compelled to do as much as the men"(Steward 14). Slaves worked on the sugar plantations six days a week; they worked from daybreak to sundown with little break during the hottest part of the day. During harvest season, they worked eighteen hours in a day. They worked twelve hours at the sugar mill's boiling house and another six hours in the fields.

This exploitation was not limited to sugar plantations; cotton was also a labour-intensive business that kept enslaved African people working the field year-round. The huge cotton plantations of Louisiana and Mississippi depended primarily on slave labour. Owners of the cotton plantations divided saves into groups according to their gender, age, and capacity, which was known as gang labour.

Several gangs of slaves worked on cotton plantations, such as hoe gangs, plough gangs, and other gangs who picked cotton. All the gangs followed the command of the slave driver, whose job was to keep everyone moving as quickly as possible. Solomon Northup shares his experiences when he was enslaved on the cotton plantation; he says, during the hoeing season of cotton fields, the overseer and slave driver followed the slaves on horseback with a long whip. If any slaves passed them, they were whipped, and if any of them fell behind or took a rest for a moment, they were whipped.

Physical Violence

Punishment was systematic, codified, and deeply embedded in the law's customs and practices of slaveholding society. The most common form of punishment was whipping, and it was rare for a slave who totally escaped the lash. A whipping could be a formal occasion-a public, ritualized display in which a sentence was carried out in front of an assembled throng or a casual affair in which an overseer, or hirer, impulsively chastised an "unruly" slave. Either way, the prevalence of whipping was a stark reminder of slave dependence; to the bondspeople, the lash came to symbolize the essence of slavery. Cotton, sugar, and tobacco plantations were known for their reliance on whipping to maintain productivity. "The whip was the most visible symbol of the authority claimed by southern planters, and there is plenty of evidence to show that they did not hesitate to use it"(Wood, 36).

Sexual Exploitation

The state of female slaves was even more atrocious. They were treated as objects of sex and faced sexual exploitation from all the male members of the slaveholding family. Slaveholders obtained female slaves for field labour and as domestic helpers. However, slaveholders expected much more from slave women and slave girls. They aspired to have sexual relationships with their female enslaved. If any female slave refused the favours of the slaveholder, then she was beleaguered and blackmailed. The enslaved women were seduced and forced into sexual relationships by their slaveholders. Some women even gave up their lives to guard their chastity. Literally, they faced hell with their masters whom they detested. There was no law to save the slaves; the masters lived a life without fear of penalty or repentance. "Not surprisingly, colonial lawmakers failed to make the sexual abuse of an enslaved woman by a white man a punishable offence"(Wood 60). Masters were easily enticed to adultery and rape. Slave women were treated as pleasure-giving objects, and slaveholders fathered children with their female slaves. This led to the creation of mixed-colour people called mulattoes. Genovese points out that, "Evidence from the slaveholders themselves confirms the existence of the stable interracial unions suggested in the narratives" (418). Chattel slavery gave slave masters power to own slave women in all aspects, and they were expected to do what their masters asked them to do.

CONCLUSION

The history of slavery and slave narratives have clarified that the institution of American slavery was not merely a system of forced labour, but a collective system of oppression. Slaves faced marginalization and subjugation at the same time. The narratives and historical records prove that marginalization and subjugation are two different parts of the same coin. Throughout history, slaves were the source of cheap labour in every civilization. Slaves in ancient civilizations were kept at the bottom of the social hierarchy and lost their social rights, and during American slavery they became tools of production. Slaves had no family or private life from childhood to old age. Every aspect of slaves' lives was measured by the overseer. Their culture and identity were erased by the slave owner for more exploitation. Racism was used as a tool of domination; white people discriminated against black people because of their colour and race; they considered them other. White people had nothing to be proud of except their white skin. Slaves were inhumanely treated; their human and legal rights were denied to keep them marginalized. The paradoxical system of justice shows there was no law made for slaves; all the laws supported the system of slavery and the inhuman behaviour of the owners. This shows that the whole system was a mechanism of exploitation run smartly by the white people.

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