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THE CONSEQUENCES OF INGRATITUDE TOWARD FORMER SLAVES IN MARTIN'S *THE INCOMPARABLE WORLD*

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Abstract: This article demonstrates, through S. I. Martin's *The Incomparable World*, that the British authorities' failure to honor promises made to former Black slaves during the American Revolutionary period led to their social exclusion and eventual involvement in crime. Many enslaved Blacks, motivated by assurances of freedom and better living conditions, joined the British royal army against the American revolutionary forces. Using a qualitative research approach based on document analysis and guided by Critical Race Theory, the study reveals that the British administration promised liberty and improved conditions to those who enlisted. However, these promises were not fulfilled after the war. Instead of receiving integration and support, former Black soldiers were marginalized and excluded from British society following the British defeat. This exclusion denied them the opportunities they had been promised, forcing many to turn to theft and other criminal activities as a means of survival. The novel thus illustrates betrayal, racial injustice, and the destructive consequences of broken promises.

Keywords: Betrayal, black slaves, criminality, racial subjugation, revolutionary period

Résumé : Cet article démontre, à travers *The Incomparable World* de S. I. Martin, que l'incapacité des autorités britanniques à tenir leurs promesses envers d'anciens esclaves noirs a conduit à leur exclusion sociale et, par conséquent, à leur implication dans la criminalité. Durant la période révolutionnaire américaine, de nombreux esclaves noirs, motivés par l'assurance d'obtenir la liberté et de meilleures conditions de vie, ont rejoint l'armée royale britannique contre les forces révolutionnaires américaines. L'étude adopte une approche qualitative fondée sur l'analyse documentaire et s'appuie sur la théorie de la race pour interpréter les phénomènes liés à l'injustice raciale. Les résultats révèlent que l'administration britannique, en quête de soldats supplémentaires, avait promis la liberté et de meilleures conditions aux esclaves qui s'engageaient. Toutefois, ces promesses ne furent pas respectées après la guerre. Au lieu d'être intégrés et soutenus, les anciens soldats noirs furent marginalisés et exclus de la société britannique après la défaite. Privés des opportunités promises, beaucoup se tournèrent vers le vol et d'autres activités criminelles pour survivre. Le roman illustre ainsi la trahison, l'injustice raciale et les conséquences destructrices des promesses non tenues.

Mots-clés: Trahison, criminalité, esclaves noirs, période révolutionnaire américaine, subjugation raciale

Introduction

Zakaria

The Incomparable World is an inclusive novel that gives an insight into the role of black slaves in the American Revolutionary War by the side of the British troops on the one hand. It also highlights the failure of the British administration to keep their promise of granting freedom and better living conditions to former slaves. Indeed, the American Revolution was a period of trouble that opposed the British authorities to the colonists in the 18th century, following some British laws that the colonists considered as coercive and intolerable. In need of additional men to fend off the colonists' forces, the British authorities had resorted to the services of black slaves by making them some promises.

The objective of this article is therefore to demonstrate through S. I. Martin's *The Incomparable World* that the ingratitude of British authorities toward some former black slaves after the revolutionary war led to their turning to beggary, theft and criminality. The study adopts a qualitative research approach based on document analysis. That is, all the data of the study that are collected are documents which means that there are no numerical or statistic data in the study. The primary sources include the selected novel and related historical documents. Theoretically, Critical Race Theory is used to guide the analysis and interpretations of racial injustice as represented in the *Incomparable World*. This work is divided into two main sections. It first accounts for Slaves and their role in the American Revolutionary War. Then it examines the ingratitude of Britain toward black slaves and its related consequences.

1. Black Former Slaves and Their Role in the American Revolutionary War

This section accounts for the motivations of black slaves for joining the royal army over the American revolutionary forces. In addition to that, it highlights the participation and contributions of slaves in the war. Finally, it scrutinizes the postwar expectations of the slaves.

1.1. Motivations for Joining the British Army

The history of slavery had been one of the most inhumane periods for people of African descents. Being posited as objects by Europeans from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, black people were transported from African mainland to Europe and America for servitudes. The large number of them were carried to American territories, mainly in the British ruled territories.

The most salient element of the practice of slavery on American soil was the harsh living condition of the enslaved Blacks as they were treated like animals. Indeed, they were objectified and reduced to mere chattels whose sole relief was when they were not whipped on plantations, or underwent other forms of punishment whether on farms or their masters' households. In

relation to the above, A.S Coulibaly and Z. Coulibaly (2019) provide the following enlightenment in their work:

American enslaved Africans or plantation slaves were much more oppressed and brutalized. The only thing that interested European slaveholders was the better management and bountifulness of their farms in order to make significant profits. Indeed, in America, the practice of slavery was mainly based on profit. To this end, enslaved Africans were forced into labors wherein they had no pays or no considerations (p.277).

The excerpt uncovers that the enslaved Blacks underwent atrocious situations in Americas, mainly on plantations where they were used as chattels just to meet the white men's economic ends. Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave* is one of the best illustration of the harsh conditions of black slaves in America.

In the following lines extracted from Douglass's autobiography, the writer rightly describes the routines of the slaves on masters' farms:

Mr. Severe, the overseer, used to stand by the door of the quarter, armed with a large hickory stick and heavy cow skin, ready to whip anyone who was so unfortunate as not to hear, or, from any other cause, was prevented from being ready to start for the field at the sound of the horn. Mr. Severe was rightly named: he was a cruel man. I have seen him whip a woman, causing the blood to run half an hour at the time; and this, too, in the midst of her crying children, pleading for their mother's release (Douglass, 1845.pp.23-24).

The foregoing passage emphasizes mainly the cruel role of overseers who were in charge of supervising slaves and the farm work. They were extremely coldhearted toward slaves, and had made the lives of the latter unlivable all along their servitude. Indeed, black slaves suffered a lot from repeated abuse which prevented them from enjoying happiness and their human rights. Hence, the oppressed Blacks were ready to do anything just to escape from eternal and unjust bondage.

As of the eighteenth century, Great Britain had started to have some difficulties with their American colonies which led to a serious confrontation between the sides. To mollify the situation, the British authorities had passed some urgent proclamations. One of which was to propose promises of freedom to black slaves if they had joined the British army against the revolutionary forces. In this regard, S. I. Martin (1996), in the *Incomparable World*, upholds: "They had all been promised their freedom as a condition of their service and they had been

promised pensions” (Martin, p.17). In this extract, the novelist highlights that the British government had used the service of slaves against their masters in their war of domination. The passage shows that many black slaves took advantage of that offer which would be a way out of the bondage.

The mentioned promises of freedom was positively welcome in the midst of the oppressed black slaves. Thousands of them hoping for liberty, dignity and better life had decided to join the British side in that decisive period of the history the American colonies.

1.2. Participation and Contributions

Black slaves contributed significantly to the Revolutionary War by fighting alongside the British army against American forces. Despite their efforts, the British were ultimately defeated. They contributed at different levels in the war: as soldiers, spies, guides, etc. Some former slaves served directly as soldiers. They were engaged in the confrontations, supporting the royal forces. All that happened following the proclamation of the John Murray, a royal governor. In view of what precedes, Michael Lee Lanning (2016) in *African Americans in the Revolutionary War*, asserts as follows:

While Washington made effort to keep blacks out of his ranks, the British were not reluctant to have them. Seeking to exploit American prejudices and to bolster their own ranks that were operating far from home, many British commanders welcomed escaped slaves into their camps. On November 7, 1775, John Murray, the Earl of Dunmore and the royal governor of the colony of Virginia, issued a proclamation that read, “I do hereby declare all indentured servants, Negroes, or others free that are able and willing to bear arms, they joining His Majesty's troops, as soon as you may be, for the more speedily reducing this colony to proper dignity”(p.2).

The author clearly affirms that at the outbreak of the war American colonists did not seek the participation of Black slaves as they kept them at bay from the war. The British government, on the other hand, made a formal appeal to Blacks to join their militaries when they needed extra men to face the colonists. As a result, the same author evidences that slaves immediately began to join massively the British side, risking their lives just in the hope of breaking the shells of bondage and claim freedom.

In addition, still in the same dynamic way, S. I. Martin evokes the case of Morris, an ex-slave soldier, and by extension many other enslaved Blacks who enlisted in the British army: “Old Morris had been born and raised in America as some white man’s property, in his case a Pennsylvania armourer’s. At the outbreak of war in the colonies, he like they had escaped

bondage to enlist in the British Army and take up arms against his rebel masters” (pp.16-17). The passage confirms the mobilization of several ex-slaves as they hoped for freedom and normal life. By joining that venture, they sacrificed themselves as to whether survive in the war alongside the Red-coats¹ or die rather than stay in permanent bondage. In lines of this idea, the following passage highlights:

Within a month, Lord Dunmore organized more than 300 escaped slaves into what he called his Ethiopian Regiment, completely with uniforms emblazoned with the slogan, Liberty to Slaves. Over the next five months, more than 30,000 former slaves rallied to Dunmore's promise of freedom. Some, like the Ethiopian Regiment, took up places in the front lines, while others worked in the rear as wagon masters, cooks, and laborers (Lanning, 2016, p.2).

The passage shows that the British authorities had been able to galvanize many black slaves with the slogan “Liberty to slaves.” As they were undergoing unbearable and cruel treatments in the colonies, many slaves organized escape plan with the complicity of the British colonial administrators. Besides, Black recruits made a lot of impact in the war, as they were brave and motivated. Because of their support, the royal army triumphed in a number of sectors.

The focus of this work is placed on the participation of Black slaves in the Revolutionary War alongside British troops; however, it is important to acknowledge that some enslaved Blacks also fought with the revolutionary forces. The presence of Black recruits among the Redcoats had a significant impact, compelling American revolutionary leaders to reconsider their position on which slaves should be barred from joining the army.

In fact, at the inception of the war the American colonists had excluded black slaves from joining their army for fear of losing their valuable properties, vital for the prosperity of their plantations. However, the bravery showed by black recruits had flinched the Americans who in their turn had proposed freedom to black slaves if they integrated the colonial army. Therefore, Michael Lee Lanning (2016) in *African Americans in the Revolutionary War* substantiates as follows:

Setbacks on the battlefield in 1774 forced the rebels to take even further action. ... The mid-Atlantic and northern states began to accept blacks, slave and free, into integrated ranks. The southern states remained reluctant to arm and serve with black soldiers but did recruit them for support roles. All blacks were promised freedom for their service, and the owners were promised compensation for the loss of their property.

¹ Red-coat was another term for British soldiers.

For the remainder of the war, blacks served alongside whites, while in pursuit of liberty and independence (p.2).

This shows that black slaves participated in the revolutionary war on the both sides. They were also promised freedom as a compensation for their service on the both sides. Indeed, they served as soldiers, spies so on. Nevertheless, slaves who chose to join either side had the same conviction. They did it because they expected freedom and better living condition after the war.

In the light of the foregoing idea, Laurie Halse Anderson (2008), in her novel, titled *Chains*, provides an enlightenment: “Most were used as military laborers digging ditches, building barricades and roads, and driving carts, though some fought as soldiers with Dunmore’s Ethiopian Regiment. While the Patriots talked about freedom, the British actually gave it to some slaves” (p.420). From the excerpt, the novelist has clearly supported that British had been more realistic in granting immediate freedom to slaves who joined their side while the American side were claiming freedom and at the same time reluctant to integrate slaves in their army in the beginning.

2. Marginalization and Its Consequences in Britain

This section examines the ungratefulness of the British toward slave soldiers after all the sacrifice they had done for Britain despite their defeat to American revolutionaries. It also reviews the social exclusion faced by ex-black soldiers and its social implication in the British society.

2.1. British Betrayal toward Ex-slaves

After the defeat of the Great Britain, the British leaders had partially kept their words by retreating from American colonies with the former black loyalists alongside the British troops. They were actually given their freedom as it was promised initially. However, the promise of pensions and better living condition were denied to them in Britain. S.I. Martin provides an evidence of that reality in the next lines from *Incomparable World*: “But as they boarded the troop-ships that would take them to exile in London none of the black fighters could have imagined the so-called freedom to which they would be doomed. In no time at all, the streets of London were flooded with an army of fresh black beggars, with bizarre accents and rotting uniforms” (p.17). The extract demonstrates that when they were shipped to London after the war, instead of a warm welcome and a satisfactory accommodation topped with risk-taking compensations, the former black soldiers were left to alone on the streets of London to fend for themselves.

In fact, the promised pensions as evoked earlier were denied to Blacks unlike their white counterparts. Although Britain lost the war, the British leaders did keep their words on the shipment of black soldiers to England, but failed to keep them on granting pensions and better living condition to Blacks. The three main characters of S.I. Martin's *Incomparable World*, namely Buckram, William and Georgie George, epitomize the sad fate of the former black slaves in the capital city of London.

These three characters, according to Martin, became quite disoriented in London as they were shocked by the attitude of the British people on the one hand, and the British authorities who failed to keep their promise relating to pension, freedom and better living condition. Worse, they were cast away like insignificant beings. They were denied the chances of the getting employment on the basis of their skin color. Thus, to feed themselves, the three poor protagonists of the alongside many other free Blacks and former slave soldiers resorted to begging. They moved from streets to streets to beg for the least substantial means. In consistence with this idea, the author evidences as follows: "It had been a thirsty summer for the beggars when Buckram first met Georgie George. A rumour had grown that black people could pass on fatal diseases simply by being in the vicinity of fresh, running water. As a result, water-sellers avoided them and they were stoned and chased away from stand-pipes and wells" (Martin, 1996. p.49). The passage reveals that although Blacks were pushed to the verge of the society, forcing them into begging, they all the same posited black beggars as porters of diseases and insanity. As a result, they decided to chase black beggars away from public wells and stand-pipes where they found the only consolation to relieve themselves.

The continual oppression and marginalization added to the feeling of frustration had enticed the former Black fighters into criminalities in the British society. In other words, the constant racial discrimination and the feeling of abandonment pressed the Britain Blacks, especially former slave soldiers, to become big criminals. The narrative shows that any time the three protagonists were involved in acts of crimes, and they seemed to relish it. In that, Martin provides a passage that highlights the consequence of the social exclusion of Britain black citizens:

Good times soon came round again for the three old cronies. Buckram was a skilful thief and footpad and Neville was a resourceful cook. Having them around seemed to boost William's luck and his gambling career took off with some measure of success. They began to frequent the Charioteer, and eventually came to be accepted amongst the better-heeled galaxy of black villains that made up the merry, malevolent London of Georgie George (Martin, 1996. p.6).

In the passage, it is shown that the three former black slaves knocked the door of crime and were eventually accepted. This was so because the frustrated Blacks were made to believe that the only way out of marginalization and poverty was to become villains. In the case of Buckram, Georgie George and William, their integration in criminal activities was motivated by the negligence and the betrayal of the British authorities who did not keep their words. From the passage, the actions of the three black protagonists in Britain was defensive. As they had no opportunity and were also oppressed, the black people living in Britain had to start strategies of self-defense which culminated in immoral activities like stealing. In that, Ramdin (1987) ascertains as follows: “The fight for survival was the essential experience of the black poor. Street life bred the art of self-defense but most of the black poor were the victims of adverse circumstances. Blacks were abused indiscriminately (p.16)”. According to this author, the actions undertaken by Britain Blacks in the light of the three protagonists of Martin’s novel were defensive action as they had no choice. It means that if they did not take actions, many of them could starve to death because no one cared for them in the British society.

In the similar dynamic way, Ramdin argues that the criminalization of London Blacks were the results of racial abuse and discrimination. With this regard, he postulates the following:

On the one hand, hunger and poverty forced them to beg and steal, while on the other, they were faced with the possibility of deportation and slavery. By all accounts then, the position of the black poor in English society was a desperate one. Cornered like animals, they had to fight for the barest existence (Ramdin, 1987, p.17).

The above extract once again illustrates and corroborates that hunger and poverty combined with social exclusion had enticed London Blacks into begging and stealing.

Conclusion

In sum, enslaved Blacks had played tremendous role in the American revolutionary period. As of the promise of freedom and better life proposed by the British authorities, the *Incomparable World* displayed that many black slaves under the servitude of American colonies’ masters ran away to join the British army. Indeed, despite the support of black soldiers, Britain was defeated.

The study has evinced that at the end of the war, the British authorities did not keep their promise relating to better and pensions to the former black soldiers. Instead, they took the former slaves who sided with them to England; however, it has been demonstrated that once taken to Britain, former black soldiers were abandoned on the streets of London, leaving them

in unemployment, starvation. Therefore, as a last resort, the marginalized former soldiers were enticed into begging, crimes and gambling in order to make ends meet. All in all, the study puts forward that the London Blacks' turning to crimes and thefts was because they were frustrated by the social injustice and exclusion. It means that injustice and frustration are intrinsic to radicalizing even the nicest person.

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