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From the Mulatto's Perspectives

Mulatto refers to the progeny of a white and a Negro individual. In slave discourses, the term refers to slaves who are half-white (Ashcroft, et al. 133). Having an admixture of a white individual's blood, mulattoes are more or less superior a distinctive element in the American Negro population, both socially and anthropologically (Reuters 37). Descriptions such as "economically prosperous, socially prominent, educated, intellectual, and part of professional groups" are most of the times associated with the mulattoes. In contrast with this, people with little trace of white admixture are said to be "poor, ignorant, religious, and socially disadvantaged" (37). Culturally, the white Americans create significant distinction in the servile population on the basis of blood intermixture. Mulatto children were usually freed by the considerate masters and were sometimes provided with education and given a start toward economic independence (39). However, there were still mulattoes who were not given privileges to be a free colored man. It is still noteworthy that mulattoes who worked as slaves for Southern whites were greatly favored. Within the slave hierarchy, the mixed bloods were seen to be more alert and more intelligent than the pure-blood Negroes, thus, they were selected for more stimulating tasks which usually require some responsibility. Being the child of a white men or women, mulattoes were more pleasing to the sensibilities of the whites. They were often designated inside the slave owner's home and other personal capacities that brought them into contact and association with other whites (39-40).

Due to the white admixture of the mulattoes, they tried to fit themselves and create a cultural identification with the dominant racial group, the whites. However, they received a "constant refusal to accept mulattoes in any social relationship to which other Negroes are ineligible and a refusal to recognize mixed-blood group as an independent reality" (40). Due to this continual rejection from majority of the whites, the mulattoes felt that they "have been forced back upon the Negro group" (40). This negative response from the dominant racial group led to two ways of adjustment from the side of the mulattoes: first, certain individuals accepted the situation objectively, just went with the flow and

developed a personal life organization within the institutional and traditional restrictions; and lastly, some formed a separate and exclusive society, held themselves apart from and superior to the Negroes. The former was supported by the ideology that “within the race, they have an assured position: their white ancestry gives them a certain prestige and the tradition of the mulatto superiority gives a self-confidence rare in the Negro group” (40). The latter was caused by unwillingness of the mixed bloods in accepting the classification with the “backward group,” hence, they are unable to accommodate themselves to the social rules (41). “The intolerant edict of the majority prevents their being white; their personal ideals and aspirations prevent their being black” (41).

The last statement above explained why the mulatto is considered “a man of divided loyalties” (41). As an aspirant for inclusion in white society, a mulatto approves its ideals and upholds its standards. However, whites still exclude him. This exclusion from the whites themselves leads to self-segregation due to his/her loyalty to the standards that exclude him/her. However, being part of the Negro population makes him unhappy and discontented since s/he still feels that sense of inferiority from the whites by being forced back to the group he is trying to escape from (41).

There were four instances which constitute to the emergence of mulattoes in the history of the slavery in the Southern states: first, miscegenation; second, concubinage of colored women by white men; third, polygamy; and lastly, the raping of the colored bondwomen by the white slave owners (Nature of Race... 127-158). I will be focusing on the first and last cases since these are the common practices among the Southern slave population.

Compared to pure-blooded Negroes, we concluded through the above accounts that mulattoes are much more superior and more privileged. However, this is just a minute part of a much bigger picture. Thelma Jennings, in her article “‘Us Colored Women Had to Go through a Plenty’: Sexual Exploitation of African-American Slave Women,” shows the real conditions of mulatto slaves (especially the female ones) in the Old South. Jennings also tackles the two chief modes which initiates the emergence of the mulattoes: interracial sexual intercourse, and the white master’s abduction of the female slaves.

Bondwomen were forced to have sexual relations with white men of any social and cultural levels. It was remarked that upper South was the “heartland” for mulattoes (Jennings 51). Paul Escott, as written in Jennings’ article, observed that “it is apparent that it [interracial sex] occurred often enough to produce substantial numbers of mulatto children” (51). It is also worth mentioning that during the 1850s, an increase in the number of mulatto slaves were taken into account, thrice greater than the black slaves in the whole South. During this decade, slavery was “becoming whiter as white enslaved mulattoes” (51).

It was believed that it was the planter’s or the slave owner’s desires, not those of slaves, were the main cause for the increase of the mulatto population. Miscegenation, in most of the times, was forced by the slave owners themselves towards female slaves, thus, the element of rape came into view (51). Angela Y. Davis, as included in Jennings’ article, said that rape of slave women was not just an expression of white men’s sexual urges, but also a weapon of domination and repression “whose goal was to destroy slave women’s will to resist – to demoralize the women and even their men” (57). Mulattoes were the direct offspring of plantation rapes. Slave masters often threaten the female slaves if they resist the master’s desire of having intercourse. If they fought back, the female slaves will be whipped, will be beaten up, or worse of all, will be killed. Once the women were impregnated by the masters, gave birth to a mulatto son or daughter, the masters will either treat them as one of his own, or will deal with him/her as one of his newly produced slaves. Alice Marshall’s mother, an elderly Kentucky woman, and Pricilla Owens, all former slaves, and as noted by Jennings, were treated well by their “master-father” (52). Alice explained that her mother was “a very light woman who never got beat” and was “kinda favorite wid de white folks” (52). Yes, these mulattoes were still considered part of the slave system in the South, but the whites took good care of them, taught them to read and write, treated them as whites, and in few instances, emancipated them and sent them to the North or to the West. Mulatto children obviously received better treatment than black children (53).

However, there are slave masters who do not distinguish these children as one of their own, thus, treating them as their properties, a plantation’s profit. After all, forced miscegenation for them is a means of increasing the resources for the future gain of the business. Mulatto offspring, especially the young

ladies, were still considered blacks and were utilized as sexual objects, a breeding machinery that will increase the labor force. Some masters even sold their mulatto children and their mothers in auctions for income generation. Jennings described this act as “the most serious indictment of the patriarchy” (53). These masters did not feel responsible for these mulatto children for two main reasons: first, a mulatto, even though the African blood that they had was minimal, was still a Negro, the white families will only consider an offspring of both whites as a family member. Second, they justified that the “black, promiscuous Jezebel had initiated the sexual relationship” (53).

In most cases, mulatto slaves found ways to escape from the slave status that tainted their personal lives. Jennings noted in her paper a certain Linda Brent, a mulatto and the great-granddaughter of a South Carolina planter, who escaped from the slavery system to get away from the sexual exploitation of her master, Dr. Flint (53). The escape of both black and mulatto slaves were executed through the system called Underground Railroad.

The Underground Railroad was a system established by Abolitionists and Southern white men during the end of 18th century which aims to free slaves from the South and escape to the North and to Canada. “For what the slave was supposed to have found was a network of people who would provide assistance and sometimes transportation so that he could reach safety in some part of the North or in Canada, where he was beyond the reach of the federal fugitive slave laws” (Bolton 7). Mulatto slaves were active partaker of this system. William Still’s “The Underground Railroad: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narrative, Letters, &c” gives a detailed account of the escape of the slaves from the South towards the North.

Mulatto slaves underwent a series of recollections and created a well-planned scheme before escaping through the Underground Railroad. These slaves knew the dangers and the consequences of what they were partaking to. Reasons varied among the mulatto slaves who were recorded to be part of the system. Even mulatto slaves who received proper care from their masters escaped towards North. In S. Charles Boston’s “Fugitives from Injustice: Freedom-seeking Slaves in Arkansas, 1800-1860, it was recorded that there is “an increase over time in the percentage of mulattoes. In both periods [before 1850,

and from 1850 through 1861], mulattoes were much more numerous among fugitives than they were in the general slave population, where they made up about ten percent” (Bolton 20). The proportion of the freedom-seeking mulattoes was more or less significant to the total population of the Negro slave runaways.

Mulattoes, just like any other slaves, had to sacrifice their families upon leaving the peculiar institution and taking a route towards freedom. It was very common that men would be leaving their wives and children to the plantations since they do not have the capacity to aid them to their escape. It was also worth mentioning that in Bolton’s accounts of the Underground Railroad, the terms “intelligent,” “can read and write,” and “bright” were always associated with the term mulatto. These just showed the distinction between the mixed bloods and the pure blood Negroes. The idea of mulatto being a man of intellect, who can think for himself and who chooses freedom among other things, was prevailing in this part of history. As a matter of fact, there were recorded mulattoes (both men and women) who dress up like their master to easily escape from their masters or overseers. Sensible reasons were given by the freedom-seeking mulattoes when they were asked why they escape from South. Being intelligible enough to be aware of their poor situations in the South, many said that they want to experience freedom that the Whites had. Some also chose to try their fortune on the Underground Railroad rather than to be sold to other slave owners. What was common among the female mulatto runaways were their intolerance towards physical and sexual abuse. (Still 60-7, 80-1, 99, 108-9, 122-28, 137, 152, 163, 189, 219-30, 267-89)

In this account of slavery of the mulattoes and the instances of escaping through the Underground Railroad, it is very evident that there still exists a proclivity towards the Negro ancestry of the mulattoes. The mere appearance of their white ancestry in terms of appearance does not really build a good reputation among the mulattoes from the white’s point of view. Mulattoes try to debunk the norm by inserting themselves within the ranks of the whites, but they fail. Their being “yellow chillun” or a mulatto gives them a significant role in the Negro history, but an inferiority complex within the white context still prevails, even until now.

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