Amistad Movie

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AMISTAD MOVIE

Slave trade that existed in the late 1800 caused a lot of human suffering in the world. The Africans were the main victims and they faced untold suffering. The Caribbean Islands and Cuba acted as the main trading centers for slaves. The Arab middle men could collaborate with the African leaders, acquire slaves in Africa and ship them to the Caribbean and other destinations in the world. The slave trade caused civil wars as the Africans tried to resist the acts of slavery.

The movie *Amistad* can be a useful source when studying about slavery and the slave trade. The movie encompasses the legal and emotional point of view on slavery. Many Africans had perished in the Atlantic sea as they crossed it. The journey took months and some of the captives died of hunger. The opposition to the slave trade started in 1792 with a group of women boycotting slave labor in the plantations. The parliament passed a bill in 1807 to abolish the slave trade.

*Amistad* was produced in 1997 and the producing director was Steven Spielberg. Steven’s movie starts as a story of slaves who were captured by a group of Spanish captors in a ship known as Amistad. The slaves overpowered their captors and tried hard to find their way back to Africa without success, though. They later found themselves in a court where they faced murder charges. Some of the people who opposed slavery tried their best to help them. They hired for them a lawyer to represent them in court. However, the lawyer did not have the required experience to handle such matters. They tried all avenues of justice and their case was taken from the lowest level of the judiciary to the highest level. Their case ended up in the US Supreme Court.

The main genre of the movie can be illustrated by a court room drama. *Amistad* can also be referred to as a social problem movie because it mainly addresses the social problems that the slaves faced. The movie is a true story of more than fifty African slaves who had been captured from their original African homeland. The Africans were brought to Cuba through the La Amistad ship. The movie contains some inaccurate information where some characters have been added to make the movie to be dramatic. The movie presents a
clear picture of the abolitionists’ efforts to end slavery. The movie contains some episodes where the abolitionists engage the captors in actual violence. The movie contains many chapters and runs for more than 2 hours. The characters of the movie portrayed different opinions on the matters of the slave trade.

Roger Baldwin acted as a lawyer for the captives. He changes his mentality of viewing Africans as property to a strong abolitionist leader. Other key abolitionists in the movie include Lewis Tappan who published newspapers on antislavery. Joadson a character of Africa American was a former slave who joins hands with Tappan to fight for the Abolishment of slavery. John Adams plays a significant role in supporting the Africans in the Supreme Court. Non-abolitionist characters included President Van Buren and the southern Senator John Calhoun. Cinque acted as a representative for the Africans, and he successfully fought for their freedom. Below is the summary of the major chapters contained in this movie.

In chapter one, the slaves were on the board of a ship. One of the slaves freed him, and he made an attempt to free the other slaves on the board. He unlocked the chains that tied them and they ganged up together against their captors. They killed all their captors who were whites, and they spared two of them (Ruiz and Montez) who could help them return to Africa. The conversations among the Africans remain untitled, and the viewer has to make conclusions from the episode. The episode lasts for less than ten minutes. Initially, the episode can be seen as an effort for the fight against slavery. The captors and the parties in the slave trade had to learn a lesson from this.

In the next episodes, the problems of the captured slaves started. After sailing for six weeks, they exhausted their water reserves. They had to sail to the dry land so that they can replenish their water reserves. However, the American navies overpowered them and they got recaptured again. They found themselves in New Haven where they got imprisoned.

The Spanish Queen and President Van Buren get the news about the occurrence. President Van Buren was campaigning, and he felt that slaves
would ruin his chances of winning in the south region. Some of the strongest abolitionists such as Lewis Tappan and Theodore appeared. The slaves were regarded as material goods in the slave trade. They appeared in the district court where different individuals laid claim to them as part of their property. One real estate lawyer by the name Roger Baldwin decided to offer help to Tappan and Joadson so as to help the slaves.

Scene five stared with a congressman named as Adams John who acted as a representative of the Massachusetts constituency in the representative’s house. John Adams did not concentrate much during the meeting and often slept during the meeting. The abolitionists Joadson and Tappan requested to meet Adams. During the meeting, Joadson asked Adams to assist them in their abolitionist work but Adams turned down their request. Baldwin tried to explain the legal basis of the case facing the Africans. They all entered a discussion on whether the Africans should be considered as goods or human beings. They also discussed whether the Africans had been acquired illegally. On the scene, a group of religious leaders visited the prison, they said prayers, and they sang the “Amazing Grace”. This signified the role of the religious groups on matters of the slave trade.

Chapter seven and eight unfolded with the lawyer Baldwin attempting to get information on the origin of the slaves (Hadden, 1997). Doubts arose on whether the slaves had originated from Cuba or Africa. He visited the prison to get further information on the real origin of the slaves. Baldwin used some maps and proved that the slaves originated from Africa. Joadson and Baldwin searched for evidence from the ship Amistad. Later they found that the slaves sailed through Tacoma by Portuguese ship which dealt with illegal slave trade. We see President Van Buren with his advisors in his office where they discussed crucial matters on the case facing the Africans. They feel that the case was sensitive and it could even cause a civil war in the country. They agreed to replace the judge who presided over that case.

Joadson paid a visit to John Adams again near his green house. Adams advised Joadson to research more on the captured Africans. Lawyer Baldwin found a translator to help him. In this episode, one of the Africans died
(Hadden, 1997). The Christians continued with their prayers and songs around the prison.

In chapter 11, Cinque explained a story of their capture and how they were taken to Cuba on board of Tecora vessel. He explained how they got sold and transferred to ship Amistad. This unveiled that the Africans had originated from Africa and they were later sold by the Spanish. The Africans were mistreated while being on board. Talking about Cinque, he originated from the Mendes.

Chapters 12, 13, 14 and 15, depicted the case of the African slaves. The district judge acted in a very unethical way during his prosecution. He strongly doubted the story of Cinque but later a British captain confirmed the story to be true. The judge heard both sides and later retreated in a chapel to pray. At this point, the Africans talked about the Bible and Christ. The judge later gave his verdict that the Africans originated from Africa and he declared them free (Hadden, 1997). The president felt threat of an impending civil war, and he transferred the case to the Supreme Court. The president was uncomfortable with the decision of the court.

In Chapter 20 and 21, John Adams had already agreed to defend Africans in the Supreme Court and delivered a strong speech there. He stated that the case at hand concerned the nature of human being (Hadden, 1997). He closely referred to letters of John Forsyth and Isabella, Queen of Spain.

Isabella referred to the courts of America as incompetent. Adams talked of the Mende tradition which subjected people into hopeless situations. He referred to Cinque, and said that Cinque could be referred to as a hero because he fought for his freedom. He concluded his speech by saying that strength and courage would help overcome prejudice and fears. Adams disregarded the author from the office of the president who defended the cats of slavery.

In chapter 22, it is dark at night. Joadson and Baldwin waited for the verdict of the judges patiently. The judge ruled out that the treaty signed by Spain could not be binding. The Africans were humans and it was wrong to refer to them as merchandise goods (Hadden, 1997). The judges set them free, and they got
their freedom to go back to their homeland Africa.

In the last chapters, the scenes show what happened to various characters in the play. President Van Buren was defeated by Harrison in the elections. The Africans started their return to their homeland in Sierra Leone. The civil war that was initially predicted occurred. However, the most important occurrence in the scene is the abolition and liberation of slaves by the British.
References

