

Aayesha M.Islam

21 November 2021

The scars of 200 years of slavery persist still in modern African American communities in the United States today as many struggle to find their true selves amongst the many stereotypes and rooted injustices that they face. Similar adversities were faced by Olaudah Equiano, a slave brought from Africa and forced to acclimatize in a completely new and harsh environment where he was belittled and seen as less than human. He records his account by writing an autobiography. An autobiography is the truest form of self-reflection and its beauty lies in being able to immerse the reader within the author's most intimate and innermost thoughts and emotions. The reader is made to see through the lens of the author, no matter how different their life experiences are, and is able to understand the author's point of view. By creating his autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African Illustrated*, Equiano rejects stereotypes of his culture and he accomplishes autonomy by establishing himself as a literate man and sharing his experiences.

Equiano demonstrates his pride for his origin by providing detailed descriptions of the culture and community of his hometown and makes it comprehensible to the target audience by comparison with the culture of the West. With an enchanting account of his childhood, his family, and his people in the Kingdom of Benen in Guinea, the author transmits the message to the reader about how they are an intellectual community, deserving of consideration and respect just like any other. While recounting the fruits and vegetables of the land, he comments that the pineapple is "the size of the largest sugar loaf" (Equiano 79), and when describing the dyes of common clothes worn, he comments that the color "is bright and rich than any I have seen in Europe" (Equiano 78); this shows his awareness of his audience and their imagination. When

elaborating on the various rituals of the people, the author mentions that the men of the community “practised circumcision like the Jews” (Equiano 82), again drawing comparison to a familiar group to the audience and showing the message that his people are not so different from them. The author puts a lot of emphasis on the strong familial bonds and stable family structures present in his community. He describes the powerful connection between him and his mother in the line, “I was so fond of my mother I could not keep from her” (Equiano 82). The childish innocence and love portrayed through his fond memories makes it all the more heartbreaking for the reader, knowing his ultimate fate of persecution. There is nothing that sends the message of humanity more than the unbreakable love of family and the author uses this as a common ground to aid the reader to draw parallels and understand an unfamiliar culture. He describes in detail the living conditions of the families, such as in the line, “He has a distinct apartment in which he sleeps, along with his male children. On each side are the apartments of his wives, who have also their separate day and night houses” (Equiano 78). Here, Equiano is elaborating on how marriage was structured in the community and the similarities and differences of it with Western structures. The obvious difference is the polygamous structure in his community versus the monogamous structure usually seen in Europe but similarities can be drawn in the manner where the men and women have different quarters. Similarities are also drawn regarding the celebration of birth and marriage in the community, especially the aspects of entertainment such as music, dancing, and feasts such can be seen in the line, “Each dance represents some interesting scene of real life, such as a great achievement, domestic employment, a pathetic story. So it is ever new” (Equiano 77). By recounting in detail such practices, the author expresses how the nation was one where the people were free. Free to simply live the lives they desired, love their families, and take part in the joy of the smallest things.

The changes to the name of the author throughout his life is a testament to his self-discovery and the struggle faced between his self-identity and perceived identity, as the latter changed between being a free person to a chained slave. During his life as a slave, he faced cruelty and was treated essentially as subhuman. Every aspect of his life was controlled mercilessly and there was no scope for self-expression, to the extent that even his name was changed every time his masters changed. The emotions felt by slaves like Equiano are analyzed in the article, "Race, Class and Color: The African American Discourse on Identity" by Bettye Collier-Thomas and James Turner in the lines, "Slavery denied Africans their original identity, leaving them with a sense that they were lacking a fundamental wholeness as human beings. Africans were confronted, not only with a condition of loss of freedom, but with the repudiation of the very legitimacy of their culture and human identification" (Collier-Thomas and Turner 10). Although Equiano desperately took refuge in the memories of his origin and people, everything that made him who he was seemed to be stripped away, right down to his name, as mentioned in the following quote, "when I refused to answer to my new name, which I did at first, it gained me many a cuff, so at length I submitted" (Equiano 96). This bitter acceptance of his new name manifested in his self-identity as no more a free man but a slave supported by the fact that even after his ultimate liberation later in his life, the fact that he kept the name Gustavas Vassa alongside his birth symbolizes the scars of the terrible conditions he went through. The tragic aftereffects of the barbaric tradition can be seen acutely throughout history as further referenced in the aforementioned article in the line, "The classic quest to know 'Who am I?' became a tragic refrain of pain that echoes in the Black voice throughout the ages to the present," (Collier-Thomas and Turner 11).

The author's loyalty towards Christianity provided him with the ability to come to terms and cope with his bleak situation and further understand the psychology of his captors and thus take the crucial steps for autonomous thinking. Equiano's belief in religion directly contrasts with his other values, in other words, they are not derived from his original culture from Africa but rather from the environment he finds himself in later in life. The introduction to Christianity occurs in England, consequently after he is fascinated with the land. He then learns of God, who is a "great Man in the Heavens" and "made us and all things" (Equiano 96). Knowing that there is an external force who is just, brings peace and solace to the author in the darkest of times. The core belief of religion and the afterlife manifests in the author's personality as the ability to remain optimistic and always see the bright side of any circumstance. The thought of everyone being God's creations and equal in His eyes establishes the author's self-worth and enables him to think of himself as being capable of more than he is made to believe by his oppressors. This goes hand in hand with the evolution of Christianity in early slave communities as observed in the article, "The Meaning of Faith in the Black Mind and Slavery" by Manning Marable in the quote, "Faith in God's love provided Blacks with a rationale to reject White authority over their spiritual and secular lives. A personal God was in harmony with the spirit of oppressed Africans" (Marable 257). Similar to the communities mentioned in the article, Equiano struggles and protests against the oppression done on him and his community by using religion as the fuel and motivator to oppose cruelty rather than its intended use by slave owners as a medium to further control and victimize them. In his work, the hypocrisy of people of the same faith as him is addressed heavily, especially after the heartbreaking instance of his sister being taken away from him. He laments to the people who have done this to him by saying, "O, ye nominal Christians, might not an African ask you, learned you this from your God, Do unto all men as you would

men should do unto you?” (Equiano 94). In this quote, Equiano shows a deep understanding of the religion and thought process of his persecutors and argues for equality using his knowledge, gaining a higher intellectual ground over them. Rather than obeying biased religious ideals designed to make people like him inferior, Equiano reinterprets his own religion, strengthening his spiritual identity.

The ability of the author to adapt with his new and shocking conditions upon arriving in England is what ultimately decides what his social position in the society will be and how his identity will be shaped to accompany his ambition. It seems as though the author’s feelings towards the land change drastically throughout the text. Unlike all his previous circumstances, he found himself not having even the slightest understanding of his present situation, not knowing the language or culture of the place. It seems the brutality was amped up towards him as well, further piling his feelings of horror on top of his confusion. The author comments, “if ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would have gladly parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my own country” (Equiano 91). From this anecdote, it can be understood that being faced with oppressors so incomparably different from himself was a horror in of itself, as there was no common ground for the author to tread on while understanding these people and it felt to him like peering into a dark and incomprehensible chasm. This shakes his entire perception of the world around him and he wonders, “how comes it in all our country we never heard of them?” (Equiano 92). This is not the last time he faces such a culture shock, as later he is entranced in fascinations with his environment such as the roads, buildings, and even nature. He is introduced to religion at this point as well and develops a more favorable impression of the culture as time goes on as highlighted in the comment, “And from what I could understand of him and his God and seeing how these White people did not sell one

another as we did, I thought they were much happier than we Africans,” (Equiano 97). This gradual acceptance of the culture which he was previously repulsed is analysed further in the article, ““I Whitened My Face, That They Might Not Know Me”: Race and Identity in Olaudah Equiano's Slave Narrative” by Ronald Paul, where he argues that Equiano takes on the identity of the “White Other”. To blend in and be acknowledged in the society, Equiano had to modify a lot of his previous conceptions about the World. The article states that, “When he arrives in England in 1767 as a free man, his desire for self-confirmation is translated into a deep-seated determination not only to ‘imitate’ his former White masters but even ‘resemble’ them in every way” (Paul 852). The same phenomenon can be seen in groups today as the pursuit of imitating “The Other” takes a toll on one’s individuality and causes division within one’s community. This is explored in the article “Blackness and Blood: Interpreting African American Identity” where McPherson and Shelby research in detail the evolution of African American identity in historical and modern times. One of the overarching themes of the article is the phenomenon of the “One drop rule” and how people of mixed races found it difficult to integrate and identify with either of their identities. This circles back to the idea of adapting to the culture and the pressure of imitating the “dominating other” to feel elevated in society but in the process becoming alienated from oneself. McPherson and Shelby describe this in the article “Blackness and Blood: Interpreting African American Identity”, by saying, “Members of historically subordinate groups, against the background of this mistreatment, develop their own and often rival conceptions of what their social identities are or should be,” (McPherson and Shelby). With Equiano, this translates into him following European religion and culture and finding autonomy through learning how to read and write and language.

Equiano's account of his innermost conflicts serves as a compassionate reminder to the members of the community in today's society. His work provides a guideline to those who are facing a similar dilemma and reassures the reader that their concerns are valid. Although slavery is no longer practiced, the discrimination between races is visible through social and economic disparities and the social praising of imitating the "Other" manifests itself through colorism and class discrimination within the community. Perpetuated by the structure of Western society, doubts of self-worth and identity often arise deep in the psyche within members of the African American community from when they are very young, causing the serious consequence of these rooted psychological issues which may linger till adulthood if not addressed. From Equiano's work, perhaps a remedy can be extracted which will aid in finding a way to perform one's perceived role without sacrificing one's autonomy and origin. Equiano becomes literate in the language and religion of the ones who oppress him. Although this can be interpreted as straying away from his origins and resembling "the other", he ultimately uses his talent and knowledge to advocate for the rights of the people of his community in a way that invokes understanding based on similarities and differences in an effort to close the gap of understanding one step at a time.

Works Cited

- Equiano, Olaudah. “*The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African Illustrated*”. *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, Martin Puchner, 4 ed., vol. D, W.W Norton, 2018.
- Marable, M., 1976. The Meaning of Faith in the Black Mind in Slavery. *Rocky Mountain Review*, 30(4), pp.248-264.
- Collier-Thomas, Bettye and Turner, James. “Race, Class and Color: The African American Discourse on Identity”. *Journal of American Ethnic History* , Fall, 1994, Vol. 14, No. 1, African Americans (Fall, 1994), pp. 5-31.
- McPherson, Lionel K. and Shelby, Tommie. “Blackness and Blood: Interpreting African American Identity”. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* , Spring, 2004, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Spring, 2004), pp.171-192.
- Paul, Ronald. "I Whitened My Face, That They Might Not Know Me": Race and Identity in Olaudah Equiano's Slave Narrative. *Journal of Black Studies* , Jul., 2009, Vol. 39, No. 6 (Jul., 2009), pp. 848-864. Published by: Sage Publications, Inc.