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by Corie Dias

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Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, or *Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* tells the story of a young man who was captured and put into slavery at the age of eleven. Equiano's journey from slavery to freedom takes place over the next ten years, not just at a physical level, but at both an intellectual and religious level as well. Equiano is truly a man of conflict, and his feelings towards slavery are complex and sometimes paradoxical. But ultimately he decides against the "peculiar institution" and makes a plea for the end of slavery. His views are forged from his own personal journey as a slave, specifically in the areas of class, religion, and his sense of economics in the marketplace.

Equiano originally came from a small district of the Kingdom of Benin in Africa. In his village Essaku, his family was of the upper class, as seen from Equiano's description of a certain mark that his father, who was a chief, bore. This "mark of grandeur" was only worn by certain men: "Most of the judges and senators were thus marked; my father had long borne it; I had seen it conferred on one of my brothers, and I also was destined to receive it by my

parents" (34). This mark would have identified Equiano as an Embrenche, or chief, in his village. He would have had the power to settle disputes and punish wrongdoings committed by the village people, had he not been taken from this society.

In his small village, Equiano had never seen or heard of either white people or the ocean. But he was well acquainted with the institution of slavery, as his upper-class family owned a large number of slaves. However, Equiano saw this slavery as completely different from what he saw when taken into captivity himself. Here, at least slaves were treated humanely, although they had their freedom taken away from them:

> How different was their condition from that of the slaves in the West Indies! With us, they do no more work than other members of the community, even their master; their food, clothing, and lodging were nearly the same as theirs; and there was scarce any difference between them, than a superior degree of importance which the head of the family possesses in our state...Some of these slaves have even slaves under them as their own property, and for their own use (40-41).

From a young age, Equiano was familiar with the institution of slavery. As an upper class citizen, he was entitled to own slaves. Although a slave himself at one time, he looks back on his village's use of slavery as decent, not detestable like what he sees in the West Indies. The slaves are treated almost like everyone else in his eyes, with equal types of food, clothing, and housing. In this way, both a sense of humanity and a sense of class order affected his early impression of slavery.

It is perhaps because of Equiano's higher class distinction that he seemingly is not against all types of slavery at this point. There seem to be degrees of badness, and he continues to come down the hardest on what goes on in the West Indies. This is brought out by Felicity A. Nussbaum in her essay "Being a Man: Olaudah Equiano and Ignatius Sancho", where she says that, "At times he even seems to disassociate England from the evils of slavery as when he vilifies the West Indies as a site of horror and inequity as distinct from the British Isles" (Nussbaum 59). Again, Equiano seems to separate slavery into different categories, even lessening his argument against slavery in England by comparing it with the West Indies. His antislavery views are not really formed until the end of the Narrative, as author Eileen Elrod points out in "Moses and the Egyptian: Religious Authority in Olaudah Equiano's Interesting Narrative":

> He certainly opposes all kinds of physical abuse as he witnesses it, but it is only long after his return to England-and perhaps, as a result of his writing the Narrative- that he comes to an anti-slavery position that impels him to seek an appearance before Parliament (Elrod 2).

And even as he expresses strong arguments against slavery in general later on, Equiano never denounces what went on in his upper class family in his own childhood village, where class status is an excuse for slave-holding.

Equiano's class views come into play again when he finds himself captive in the hands of other Africans. He is horrified by one particular group of people; he sees them as backwards and uncivilized. He comments that they "ate without washing their hands... and fought with their fists among themselves" (52). He also makes a direct comparison between these people and his own, saying, "Their women were not so modest as ours, for they ate, and drank, and slept with their men...In some of these places the people ornamented themselves with scars" (52). Equiano is disgusted by these people, seeing himself as belonging to a higher class, and concludes that he "would not suffer them; hoping that I might some time be among a people who did not thus disfig-

ure themselves, as I thought they did" (53). When he is first confronted with a slave ship and white men, he thinks that these men with different complexions are evil spirits with bad intentions: "I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair" (54). White men may have seen these black natives as animals, but no more than Equiano saw them as horrible beasts, a life form lower than himself. Once on the slave ship, his aristocratic views continue, as he is crammed down below with many dead and dying Africans. With these horrible surroundings, Equiano's worst suffering came from the "pestilential" smell (56).

Equiano's fears eventually subsides somewhat, as he becomes aware that he will not be eaten. He is not afraid of working, and once landed in the new world even does a little side business to make money for himself. It is at this early time in his slavery that he begins to take an interest in education and religion. Equiano takes an interest in reading as he is traveling on board a ship with his master, thinking that if he talks into a book, it will talk back (64). He eventually learns to read, when two white women, the Miss Guerins, send him to school. He also begins to learn about religion and is told that unless he is baptized he will not go to heaven. He asks the Miss Guerins to let him be baptized, and she complies with this request.

Around this time, Equiano's intellectual journey really begins. He starts to see himself as more of a European than an African, and expresses an interesting observation about his enslavers:

> I not only felt myself quite easy with these new countrymen, but relished their society and manners. I no longer looked upon them as spirits, but as men superior to us; and therefore I had the stronger desire to resemble them, to imbibe their spirit, and imitate their manners. I therefore embraced every occasion of improvement, and every new thing that I observed I treasured up in my memory (72).

Equiano is truly a man of the Enlightenment, as he sees himself fully capable of personal growth. He now desires to imitate the people that hold him captive, seeing them as superior because of their seeming intelligence and good manners, and he strives to do this through his education, especially in the area of religion. His favorite companions are generally white educated people who help him in his understanding of the Bible.

Equiano's understanding of the Bible becomes perhaps the strongest theme in the Narrative. Equiano sees this as the greatest force in his life, as his faith in God grows. His new-found religious views also seem to make him feel safer and more confident in his ability to change into someone loved by God. This can be seen especially when Equiano recounts an experience that took place during one of his sea voyages, where several people, including himself, fell from the upper deck of the ship. Miraculously, not one person was hurt, and Equiano gives God the credit for this:

> In these, and in many more instances, I thought I could plainly trace the hand of God, without whose permission a sparrow cannot fall. I began to raise my fear from man to him alone, and to call daily on his holy name with fear and reverence. And I trust he heard my supplications, and graciously condescended to answer me according to his holy word, and to implant the seeds of piety in me, even one of the meanest of his creatures (80).

This strong faith in God becomes further apparent as the text progresses, as well as Equiano's use of Scripture. He often quotes, as he does here, directly from the Bible.

Equiano's new Christian views shape his negative view of slavery. One of the most outstanding areas of his argument is based on a Bible verse found in Matthew 7:12: "Key to his condemnation of slavery

(and to many other anti-slavery texts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) is the Golden Rule...Equiano shames his readers for their refusal to 'do unto others', to exercise the most basic human compassion" (Elrod 3). The rule of doing to others what you would have them do to you obviously is not at all compatible with the institution of slavery. Whether a slaver is kind despite his dominion over his slaves or if he cruelly inflicts brutal punishments upon them, this is not in agreement with the Biblical principles that Equiano becomes acquainted with. Equiano believes that he is further enabled to be loved by God as he takes in more Bible knowledge and applies it in his life, and he encourages slave owners and traders to do the same.

There is some discrepancy, however, in the way Equiano relates his religious views to his enslavement. There is a clear distinction in the *Narrative* between pious Christians, such as himself, and the hypocritical Christians who enact violence on slaves. Yet the reader cannot be sure whether Equiano blames these hypocrites or whether he blames himself and God for his situation as a slave. At the end of chapter four, he is sold yet again to a different master, at which he grieves deeply. He does not blame his owner for this but says, "I must have done something to displease the Lord, that he thus punished me so severely... I thought God might perhaps have permitted this, in order to teach me wisdom and resignation" (86). This view that he is being punished by God when he is sold does not seem to agree with the opinion that slavery is an evil institution that goes against what the Bible says. Equiano then promises God that he will behave from then on, but in the very next paragraph begins to plan an escape. So he believes in a way that God is on the side of the slavers, yet "his radical submission to God does not hinder him from active rebellion against his master" (Elrod 9). His view here almost seems to support the slave owners' view that the slaves are unworthy of God's love and compassion, while at the same time he prays to God for just that. This area of the Narrative shows the Equiano is somewhat conflicted in his views as he attempts to make his religion and his views of slavery work together. But on the whole, this section of the Narrative does further his argument against the slave owners, as he does again plan to escape and then goes on to describe some of the cruelest slave treatment he has yet observed.

He speaks out again against these cruel men, saying, "Jesus tells us, the oppressor and the oppressed are both in his hands; and if these are not the poor, the broken hearted, the blind, the captive, the bruised, which our Saviour speaks of, who are they?" (108). In this instance, we see Equiano using the Scriptures both to emphasize the cruelty of the slave owners and also to show that the Bible tells a story of freedom from bondage. This bondage theme continues to develop, as Equiano compares the slaves to the oppressed of the Bible who were eventually freed. Once he gains his own freedom from bondage, he draws another parallel to the Bible, comparing his experience to that of the Biblical character Elijah:

> Heavens! who could do justice to my feelings at this moment...My feet scarcely touched the ground, for they were winged with joy; and, like Elijah, as he rose to Heaven, they 'were as lightning sped as I went on.' Everyone I met I told of my happiness, and blazed about the virtue of my amiable master and captain (119).

With these words Equiano compares his becoming a free man to Elijah's miraculous entrance into heaven. He shows his readers that liberation here on Earth can be compared to that of Heaven. This also makes a strong argument against the "line of argu-

ment so familiar to Christian slaves and their masters, that freedom would come 'by and by' in heaven for those who would wait for it" (Elrod 7). Rather than wait for his freedom in the next life, Equiano has used hard work and his faith in God to achieve that freedom here on Earth. His quotations and declarations of piety show how much he relied on the Bible during these times, and also that freedom could be achieved through faith in God. These parallels between Biblical figures and slaves show just how strongly religion influenced Equiano's view of slavery.

Despite these religious findings against slavery throughout the text, the Narrative does contain another contradiction in Equiano's views. Perhaps the most disturbing part of the text is that despite his speaking out against slavery, Equiano himself took part in the slave trade and benefited financially from it. Author Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds discusses this paradox in her essay "The Spirit of Trade: Olaudah Equiano's Conversion, Legalism, and the Merchant's Life", where she comments that "the irony arises ostensibly opposing spiritual and economic components of Equiano's identity: He may have worked to earn individual 'freedom,' but the work itself placed him squarely within the dehumanizing ideology of capitalism's driving slave market" (Hinds 2). Having been a participant in the slave trade in his own village years earlier, Equiano now finds that his place in the world of economics places him right in the middle of the market that was responsible for his own enslavement. He does not approve of slavery and is horrified by what he sees when in this position of trader, particularly the horrible treatment of female slaves. He discusses this in Chapter five, where he tells the reader that he often had cages full of slaves under his supervision, and it was a common occurrence for the white clerks there to rape the women. But, much to his sorrow, he was "obliged to submit at all times, being unable to help them" (93). He felt unable to retaliate against these men.

Equiano is aware of this brutality as he engages in the slave trade of the market for his own benefit. He unarguably has a good reason for wanting to earn money, as it is the only way of procuring his own freedom. Unfortunately, in trying to free himself from slavery, Equiano takes part in enforcing the slavery of others. This attempt at freedom may have come at the cost of his own spirituality for a time, as pointed out by Hinds:

> The cost of freedom developed in his autobiography, for a time, comes at the cost of Equiano's spiritual identity, for in entering 'free trade,' he operates within a system that denies him, as he is reproduced in the slaves transported on the ships he used to transport his own goods: As trader and slave at once, Equiano performs as an equivalence both to 'Africa' and to Africa's slaveowners (Hinds 2).

It is interesting that during this portion of the Narrative, Equiano still cites the Scriptures and speaks out somewhat against the cruel treatment he observes, but he does not mention his own spirituality or piety. His involvement in the market now seems to become the main theme in his life, rather than his own spirituality. It seems almost that he has lost this part of himself during the time that he assists in the trading of his fellow people, as money and the goal of freedom take precedence in his life.

This contradiction is something that Equiano never comes out and rationalizes, but he does continue to express the wish that slavery be abolished, developing new reasons for such action to take place. He now begins to use economic arguments in addition to religious reasoning. This argument comes out particularly in the last chapter of the Narrative, where he begins an extensive argument that slavery should be abolished, not only because of the "tortures, murders,

and every other imaginable barbarity and iniquity" (194), but also because it would be good for the British economy:

> Population, the bowels and surface of Africa, abound in valuable and useful returns; the hidden treasures of centuries will be brought to light and into circulation...In a word, it lays open an endless field of commerce to the British manufactures and merchant adventurer. The manufacturing interest and the general interests are synonymous. The abolition of slavery would be in reality [a] universal good (194).

With this argument, Equiano makes his appeal in terms of commerce, trying to convince the reader that this plan would be best for the British people economically. He offers up Africa as a land abounding in "hidden treasures," an "endless field" for the adventurous British merchant.

Equiano then follows this persuasive argument with a list of the horrible cruelties that he has seen inflicted on his fellow slaves over the years. This leads into another plea that slavery be abolished, based on what he has put forth in the Narrative. It is interesting that he ends with an economic argument, rather than one based on his religious views. This may be a direct result of Equiano's split between anti-slavery views and his participation in the slave trade. Although his religion was a huge influence on his life, it seems to take a lower spot towards the end of the Narrative, as his interest in finance climbs while his spirituality diminishes.

Nevertheless, Equiano's move towards religious enlightenment played a very strong part in the formation of his views about slavery. Although his original views of slavery were based on his childhood and the class system that existed in his village, Christianity made a great impact on his life. Being baptized gave him a sense of equality with the white man that inspired him to become a more educated person. What he read in the Bible caused him to make his stand against the hypocritical Christians, stating the need for the Golden Rule among all people. He also used his knowledge of the Scriptures to make parallels between Biblical figures in bondage to the slaves in his own day. Equiano then became involved in the marketplace slave trade himself, but he used what he saw in the marketplace to further shape arguments against slavery, this time of an economic nature. Although conflicted at times, Equiano did make a stand for what he believed in based on his own life as a slave. His text tells not just the story of one slave's life, but how these experiences forged his views about the "peculiar institution" of slavery.

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