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Critique #1

Olaudah Equiano

Since this class relies on the assumption that history is a combination of all the life experiences of any given people, I can confidently say that The Life of Olaudah Equiano aided in my understanding of the result of slavery and colonization in the unexpected Africa. In this book I believe that Olaudah had many objectives that he wanted to reader to obtain through his experiences. I will address the objectives that I feel were the most confidently portrayed in his novel.

In the early pages of The life of Olaudah Equiano, Olaudah, also known as Gustavus Vassa, briefly describes customs and traditions of his village, Esseke, in Benin. I believe his objective in these few pages was to illustrate his society had a civilized way of life and was on its way to greater development. I think he also wants the reader to understand that Esseke, like most villages, had no knowledge of the Europeans and their corrupted plans. For example, Like Umuofia, his village's had a government. These men were called Embrenche. These men decided disputes and punished crimes by acting as judges and thus proving that there was an organized democracy and a development in the humanities. In the book, Olaudah also mentions that he never heard of the Europeans which meant that these customs as well as others were developed before European influence.

In contrast to Umuofia, Equiano's village, described on page 12. was filled with dancers, musicians, and poets who were appreciated. Equiano himself owned several drums, a sting instrument resembling a guitar, and a sticcado. These forms of entertainment were used at various gatherings which proves that Africa was highly

developed and talented in the Arts. In addition, according to Ali Mazrui in The Africans, Africans were reading and writing before the British were even taught Latin, which proves that they were also developing in a Literary sense.

Equiano's village, as explained on page 17, as well as Umuofia, has various means of production in conjunction with tools and forms of labor. They lived off the land, and produced only what was needed, a self-reliance life style. They also had building structures for homes and social organization. Both cultures also had a type of organized religion which centered around the worship of one Supreme Being, which was common according to Vincent Knapoya on page 55 in The African Experience and Ali Mazrui in The Africans.

When I add together the characteristics of these African Societies I get the impression that Africa was indeed civilized. Compared to modern day America, they both have government, entertainment, religion, living necessities, social organization, and every other standard of living. Furthermore, all this was developing with out European influence. After looking at the facts, I realize that Africa was not the underdeveloped, underprivileged, barbaric continent that the Europeans ignorantly claimed. Africa was civilized, content with their living conditions, developing at their own rate, and therefore had no reason to assume that the Europeans would ever invade their land for reasons of development. This entire argument contradicts the reason the Europeans used in order to gain support for entering Africa, but I doubt that this argument would have stopped the invasion.

At the same time Africa was developing on it own, America was starting to be colonized, and England was looking for a new land to westernize. The British victim was

Africa. Since the New World was young and had limited means of production, Africa was also their victim. African slaves were a source of cheap labor for the Americans and soon Europe, America, and Africa was entangled in a cruel triangle. As provided in Equiano's notes, Traditional slave ships collected the slaves in Africa in exchange for goods, and then headed toward the American continents. They would sell the slaves in the Americas and collect more plantation goods for the return trip to Africa. When they arrive at the homeland, they would exchange goods for slaves and repeat the process. This not only supporting the use of slaves, but it also lead to the developmental stand-still in Africa while promoting colonization.

“It was not the Africans who were barbaric; it was the people who invaded Africa who were truly barbaric in their ways.” This statement, made by Ali Mazrui in The Africans sums up a lot of hatred feelings toward the European Colonialists. The second Objective that I believe Equiano wanted to illustrate was the inhumanities in the slave trade. I recognize this as one of his main objectives from the paragraph on page ten, where he states that he wishes to promote the interests of humanity.

Equiano wants the reader to understand that there was slavery in Africa, but the slaves were not treated as badly as slaves in Europe and America. Equiano recalls his African masters as second families to him. An African slave can even become free if they bore a child to their master. Slaves in Traditional Africa were not treated like property, less than humans, like they were treated in the British – American - Indian slave trade.

At age eleven, Equiano and his sister were kidnapped from their home in Esseke. After Equiano is traded among Africa, he finally reaches the coast, and confronts his first slave ship. On this ship, he was more fortunate than others, but he witness some of the

most extreme cruelties punished on man. He witnessed disease, deadly smells, and starvation on the ship, as well as deaths and suicides. He also accounted on page 34 that after the merchants would feed themselves, they would throw leftover food into the sea instead of giving it to the slaves. It is now known that only one out of every two slaves made it through their middle passage voyage. The trip from Africa was the worst he experienced; his trip to the Americas was considerably better.

He experienced the plantation life style for only a short time under his master Mr. Campbell before he was sold to a Royal Navy Lieutenant, Mr. Pascal. He then voyaged to England. Pascal became his friend and companion while they went many places together while fighting for the British in the Seven Year's War. As they traveled across the European coasts, Equiano developed relationships with his shipmates as well as people on land which impacted his psychological development.

As Equiano points out on page 51, his view of the white man changed. He no longer looked at them as evil spirits, but as men superior to the black man. His sense of inferiority strengthened his strive to become more like them. He became so European that when he stumbled upon a fellow African on page 78, he could no longer relate to all the problems the boy had faced. Within his strong desire to become more English, he lost touch with his roots and temporarily forgot the devastation of his people in Africa.

This followed by becoming more serious about Christianity. Soon, he was baptized, and calling on God in his misfortunes. The best example of this is when he is unexpectedly sold by his master to a group of India men. At the time Equiano was under the assumption that he would soon be free when Mr. Pascal's ship returned to London and they were all paid. But his dream was destroyed on page 64 when his new master

said “you are now my slave”. This took a great toll on his psychological development because he assumed the Lord was somehow displeased with him. Later on page 67 he takes a more positive approach by suggesting that God was putting him through these trials and tribulations so that he would develop wisdom. These examples lead me to wonder what types of greater psychological damage he could have had, if he did not have his relationship with God to fall back on.

After being sold to a kind master, Mr. King from Philadelphia, Equiano witnessed even more brutality toward his people in the West Indies as well as in the Americas. His master owned a merchant ship that carried loads of slaves to plantation owners in the American colonies in exchange for goods. As pointed out on page 77, he saw slaves forced to their knees praising their masters in order to save themselves from beatings. Equiano often states that a feeling of refuge in death was often thought of, but when attempted, slaves often failed. And since he often witnessed the vary auctions that divided Africans to their new masters, he knew that a slaves life was often worth a six-pence or less as stated on page 79. Knowing all this information and seeing the cruelty and inhumanity would have sent a modern day American into a mental institute, but Equiano stayed strong and used it as fuel to work toward his own freedom and ultimately make a difference.

He reached his goal in 1766 when his paid his master and captain for his freedom. Although, this was a short lived boost in esteem, He soon learned that a new law was passed. It was now law in the West Indies that a black’s evidence would not be admitted into a white court. He then came to the conclusion that he would never be completely free as long as he stayed in the West Indies.

To my amazement, after all his unfortunate run-ins with inhumane, greedy European merchants, he developed into a respectable man. All through his life he was dedicated to his masters and made honesty an internal commitment. He became truly adventurous in his later years and educated himself at every opportunity. He even visited his old master Mr. Pascal, but was disappointed in his lack of regret for selling him. This made Equiano realize the great racial boundary between blacks and whites that slavery had created.

While the West Indies and Americas were still struggling with accepting free slaves, Europe was doing much better through Equiano's eyes. He was treated fairly and he obtained many friends there that were more willing to help him in misfortunate events. At this time, Europe had no need for slaves other than for the use of house maids and ship workers. There was less demand for manual laborers because they didn't have plantations like the West Indies and Americas and I believe that played a key role in the friendship and respect that he was given in London.

Even though Africa was not talked about often through the book, his voyages on slave ships prove that the conditions in Africa were not improving. There were still masses of slaves being sold to plantation owners, and being ill treated everywhere they went. There were a few slaves that did obtain their freedom like Olaudah, but still were subject to even harsher treatment since they did not have a master to protect them from other barbaric whites.

In the last pages of the book, Equiano obtained an opportunity to make a difference in the world by becoming a missionary and fellow abolitionist in Africa. Although he had high hope of saving his native land, he was constantly confronted with

the effects of inherent racism and was not able to get permission to make the journey. With even more hope to do good amongst his country men, Equiano switched his efforts to fight against mistreatment of slaves. He finally made a big leap with the honor of presenting the Queen with a petition on the behalf of his African brethren, and the negro consolidated act was passed.

The last objective that Equiano makes in his book is his fierce theory that the abolition of slavery would be a universal good. He states that “the abolition of slavery will give most rapid extension of manufactures, which is totally and diametrically opposite of what some interested people assert.” He proves that colonialism was a extension of slavery, but now with trade of African goods for manufactures, the world can move above and beyond the inhumanities of slavery.

To me, this book is a great over view of not only the bad treatment of slaves in America but also the conditions of slavery in the West-Indies, Europe, and in Africa, which were quite diverse. It also made me realize slavery not only effected Africa but it created an evil racial boundary between whites and blacks everywhere, even after they were equally free. By sharing Equiano’s brave experiences, strength, and faithfulness to even those who betrayed him, I have come to a new understanding of the impact on the physiological development of an African Slave. All in all this book has enlightened me on the diversity and forever changing conditions in African History.