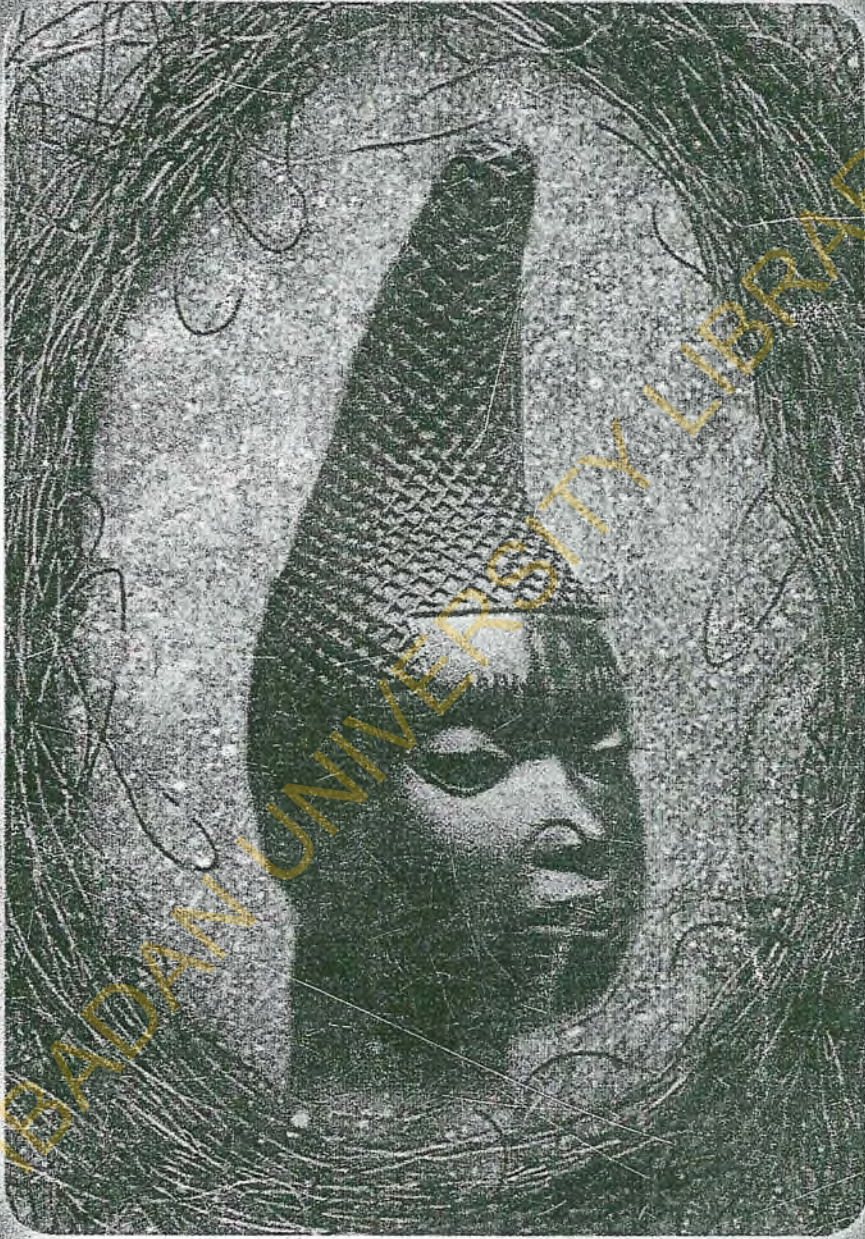


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Autobiography through the Exile Paradigm: The Oluadah Equiano Story

Doyin Aguoru

Abstract

This paper examines the relevance of biographical works in literary studies. Using Oluadah Equiano's story, the essay treats thematic issues with regard to the slave trade and its consequences on Africans. It posits that what led to the success of the story as a historical document is its effectiveness as a tool in the anti-slavery campaign.

Introduction

This study focuses on the historical and autobiographical account of a major event that transpired during the medieval ages. The medieval period in Europe was a period of change and diverse transformations. The transformations made significant impact on the psyche of the Europeans in terms of their religious, economic and social existence. Economic revolution in Europe was a driving force that necessitated a strategic plan for additional humanpower and new trade routes. A direct consequence of this development was the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, which was estimated to have spanned over four and a half centuries.

Oluadah Equiano's experience as a slave depicts the core of the psychological, social, economic, cultural, and religious effects of this particular trade on Africans, and humankind in general.

Autobiography as a form has earned for itself a polemic identity. Polemics, as described by Roger Rosenblatt (1980; 170) is the 'art of disputation, technical use of argument to refute errors...' Several discourses on the history, movement, form, style and significance of autobiographical writings have proved the genre to be the most elusive of literary documents because 'there are simply no general rules available to the critic' (Olney, 1980:3).

Yet, the desired significance of literature to society has placed certain demands on various writers, groups and ideologists who heuristically write and propound theories through which individual human identities and relevance can be established. Autobiography, therefore, has become in the hands of some scholars a tool for achieving focus in literature through studies that otherwise have little by way of a defining and 'organizing centre' (Olney, 1980: 13). Though some contemporary writings have disputed the elusiveness of the form and the scepticism of some critics, they, however, consistently adopt a posture that implies that such documentary narratives offer privileged exposure to universal, societal and communal experiences that no other variety of writing seems to provide.

Autobiography, in a subtle manner therefore, depicts in a transparent way, the perception and the experiences of a people, which perhaps motivate other forms and writings by the same class of autobiographical writers. It attains and sustains popular and intellectual interest, which seeks to deconstruct layers and varieties of rich and diverse literatures.

Equiano's Travel as Reference: Justification

The choice of *Equiano's Travels* is informed by the contribution of the book to an understanding of the experience of slavery and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the legacies of European activities in Africa in a period of over five centuries. Pascal (1960:3) describes such writing 'as a view of life from a particular moment in time'.

The knowledge required for the present age and the future rests on the acquisition of relevant knowledge in historical and social events from which all sound reasoning ought to evolve. In this case autobiography offers clues, and at times, details of historical happenings, geologies, ties and origins of peoples. Furthermore, a survey of autobiographical studies indicates that studies of Black peoples revolve primarily around autobiography:

From Frederick Douglas to Malcolm X, from Olaudah Equiano to Maya Angelou, the mode specific to black experience has been autobiography, and of recent times critical literature has more than kept pace with the primary literature. In black literature and its criticism, we have something akin to a paradigm of the situation of autobiography in general (Olney, 1980:15).

The works of Equiano, Douglass and Malcolm X have, in the last few years, been brought under the focus of literary analysis, which surely may not have been the particular vision of these writers as one would have expected it to be of more relevance to historical or social science studies.

Paradigmatic concepts that have evolved from autobiographic forms are also reflected in purely African studies. A recent survey of theoretical issues in African autobiography reveals the performative function of the autobiography.

The African autobiography can be described as a reflection of the African condition, the universality of African themes through the use of African imagery (Oriaku, 1998:8). The works, as representative forms of historical and social documentaries, have their relevance and significance typified in the individual's views of his/her society and his /her relationship in the historical, political, and social factors that dominate his/her existence.

Oriaku (1998) observes that a number of peculiar influences remain predominant in African autobiographies. The African society from its earliest state was egalitarian; it employed positive propaganda and celebrated with pride the cultural values of its peoples. The unfortunate events of slavery, civil wars, anti-colonialism and anti-apartheid struggles produced thematic preoccupations in narratives.

These socio-political events affected in a number of ways the portrayal of the African community. In an egalitarian society, the African autobiographer's 'sense of self is ... different because his story is inextricably linked with that of his society' (Oriaku, 1998:9). This is evident in Olaudah Equiano's thematic preoccupations. He projects the belief in the origin, customs and values of the African people as seen through the eyes of an African slave in exile.

African autobiographers in the course of struggles and movement write to facilitate the successful prosecution of revolutions as well as expose, through the account of their lives the ills and weaknesses of certain groups, which they hope would act as a catalyst for a socio-political mobilization. In autobiographical narratives of Africans, pride in customs often takes up the largest percentage of self-narration. What started out as a presentation of the personality of the writer ends as a celebration of the culture and values of his people (Oriaku, 1998:11). Issues of identity and veneration of ancestors are portrayed as being part of the kinship ties that link Africans. The African autobiography is thus a reflection of the historical documentation and positive propagandistic techniques used by Africans.

A controversial base that, however, needs to be clarified in this study is the credibility of the autobiography. Pascal dedicates a chapter of his work titled 'The Elusiveness of Truth' (1960: 61) to this issue. The intention of an autobiographer, he postulates, is to give the truth about his or her person.

Recollection of memories, the first step in autobiographical writing, entails certain exertions, and eventual selection. This also includes certain formulas or principles to be adopted if the work is to be a success. Truth in this setting therefore varies. In the case of religious autobiographies, it may be in respect of the truth of faith which the subject professes while another autobiographer's choice of truth may be from specific outlook or professional accomplishment.

Pascal also acknowledges the presence of a reflex and sub-conscious action in the autobiographer's mind, which he describes as the inner censor. This is an automatic mechanism that takes care of unpleasant memories and secret shame. He, however, insists that this inhibition does take very little or nothing away from the credibility of the autobiography.

We could not, and do not want to know everything about man but only what is distinctive and essential. And when we are worried about the possibility of truthfulness, it is not much of this that makes us apprehensive, as the possibility of truthful and objective relationship to oneself. (Pascal, 1960:61)

Historical authenticity is a unique feature that unifies black fiction and black autobiography. The motivation and purpose of these two schools of writing aim at achieving the same goal, which is to document past experiences and reflect societal images. Each of these two is considered a worthy literary form in writing. Rosenblatt opines that black autobiographies exist as different literary forms because of the discernible patterns that tie them together and the auto-biographer's perception of the world in which s/he finds him/herself, one that remains '...consistent and unique' (Rosenblatt, 1980: 170).

Black fiction is often so close to black autobiography in plot and theme that the study of the latter almost calls the existence of the former into question. The response of a reader to both genres ... is equally astonishing and rhetorical [Rosenblatt, 1980:170]

In contemporary times, black biography, like black fiction, has evolved from what has been described as 'rehearsal of horrors', a point from which early writings, especially slave narratives, took off. Slave narratives and early black writing contended with issues of subjectivity, protests against inhumanity, victimization, unjustifiable but established social norms and assumptions. The issue of historical authenticity becomes established because when 'a central character is black, the abuses are authentic. No black American author has ever felt the need to invent a nightmare to make his point' (Rosenblatt 1980:171).

An academic and historical record of advertisements for runaway slaves is a paradigm of this concept. Slaves, in the framework of the practice of slavery were considered available property and their owners placed high value on possessing them. The slaves' escape triggered off frantic efforts at recovering them, and among the strategies employed are newspaper advertisements that usually described the slave's appearance and a handsome reward is usually offered to citizens who could help facilitate the return of these slaves.

*[a] \$50 Reward. Ran away from his subscriber, this Negro paladore, commonly called Paul I understand GEN.R.Y.HAYNE has purchased his wife and children, from H.L PINLNEY, ESQ. and has them now on the plantation at Goose Creek, where no doubt, the fellow is currently lurking.
T. Davis Richmond. Enquirer, February 20, 1838.*

[b] STOP THE RUN AWAY: FIFTY DOLLARS REWARD!

Eloped from the subscriber, living near Nashville on the 25th of June last year, a Mulatto man slave, about thirty years old, five feet and an inch high, stout made and active, talks sense, slops in his walk and has a remarkably large foot...if taken out of the state, the above reward and all reasonable expenses paid and ten dollars for every hundred lashes any person will give him to the amount of three hundred. Andrew Jackson; Near Nashville State of Tennessee, Tennessee Gazette. (Nashville) November 7, 1804 (Bellesiles, Encarta 2003).

The position of a black autobiographer in recounting and in the portrayal of thematic strands across such experiences as violence, poverty, injustice, ridicule, degradation, even death, aligns the genre with classical tragedy like no other literary tradition. It is in this framework that the genre evolves its power and its form. The autobiography has earned full literary franchise, which is evident in its significance to historical, contemporary and strategic studies.

Olaudah Equiano's story is unique as it is the first compendious record of an African autobiography on slave trade. His narrated experience confirms Pascal's assertion that 'autobiography' is a shaping of the past. It imposes pattern on life and constructs out of it a coherent story.

The Emergence of the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade

The Medieval period in Europe was defined by manifold dimensions of changes and revolutions, in almost every area of European existence. Dominant events of the time included religious transformations and territorial disputes amongst dynasties. The High Middle ages were the period between 1050

and 1300, a period that also witnessed profound intellectual and religious change.

There were also agrarian revolutions between 1050 and 1200. With an increase in this sector, Western Europe advanced towards a money economy. Invasions in 1066 gave rise to a feudal political system that was in place for the two centuries after. In 1315, crop failure, which was largely as a result of bad weather resulted in famine. This period was one of social disruptions, which witnessed malnutrition, poor sanitary situations and sharp increase in death rate because of the Black Death plague in Europe that did not subside even after the growth in agricultural produce. Other natural disasters as well as war and famine prevailed, hence, the great reduction of the population in the late middle ages.

The invention of the magnetic compass in the late middle ages aided overseas exploration, which greatly enhanced trade and pilgrimages outside Europe. The fall of the Roman Empire led to the disuse of many existing routes. That period was referred to as the dark ages - the first few centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire.

Trade transactions within Europe became diversified into other continents. The old routes were removed before the end of the millennium in the Baltic, the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. Economy and trade were the major factors that motivated the travels that were made at this period.

Countless theoretical and critical writings have evolved from the event, the impact and the consequences of the slave trade. Postulations in these studies have generated theories and criticisms from different perspectives.

The concept of exilic studies arose from among the numerous black experiences. The word, 'exile', means a sort of forceful dispersion and expulsion from one's indigenous land as well as a forced absence from one's natural habitat. The 20th century

witnessed the expansion of the concept of this Greek word 'dispersion' as it became well suited for the various studies of groups dispersed from their homelands. The widespread of such movements brought about Diaspora Studies, which have also been used to describe similar experiences.

Africans who suffered the direct impact of the slave trade insist that despite the volumes written on the slave trade the world still waited for Africa to write the African side of the story and analytically too. Interestingly, these African historical and sociological records corroborate the autobiographical account given by Olaudah Equiano.

The impact and the consequence of the trade are enormous, such that its legacies, landmarks and direct impact remain throughout the whole world. Donald Wright, in his critical analysis, observed that though the trade was an economic phenomenon, it was the Africans who crossed the Atlantic in millions, over a period estimated to have lasted for four centuries, and that this dispersion had tremendous cultural, social, demographic and intellectual effects on Europe and America. P.I. Tiedt *et al*, in their attempt to evolve a strategy for multicultural teaching in America, observe:

Thinking in the new world changed in many ways following the first settlement in Jamestown in 1607...immigration continued, but it was largely from Europe. Then the slave trade began, bringing in the largest block of immigrants ever... the fact [was] that they came involuntarily. The agricultural economy particularly the south's large cotton plantation depended on this slave labor. Thus, the stage was set for a series of strange events in our history that led eventually to freedom and a measure of equality for these slaves and other people of colour (2002:4).

Historically, slavery is one institution that was shared by mankind. The practice of slavery was not unusual and 'the most popularized ancient instance of slavery was that of the Jews...' (Benson 2001: 48).

Western propaganda persistently claims that Africans willingly sold their brethren because they came from societies that thrived on slave trade. Even though this impression has been refuted by many Africans, one still finds some western writers insisting that the black race was deliberate in its greed:

Any notion that Africans were duped into accepting trinkets of little value is incorrect. Most knew what they wanted and could hold out for good terms... the prices Europeans paid for slaves rose steadily through the years. An English buyer could obtain a healthy slave for 5.5 pounds worth of commodities in 1690 and 14 pounds worth in 1760. The same slave sold in Virginia for 15 pounds in 1690 and 45 pounds in 1760. (Donald Wright, Ecantra, 2003).

Social history claims that the slavery that existed in most West African societies was the type Equiano described as the African Slavery in his work. Even though the African agriculturist depended on a large family – basically through marriage, procreation and acquisition of few slaves – it was 'a system of indentured servitude' (Benson 2001: 48). Such category of people were not a majority neither did they form a specific class in the social stratum. They were also not so discriminated against or given sub-human treatment.

The Trans Saharan Trade that covered the geographical regions of North Africa and the Middle East also practiced the age long system of indentured servitude; most of the slaves in these regions became accepted members of their new households.

Being furnished with these facts, however, does not vindicate the West Africans of their active participation in the trade. They were lured with trinkets, cloths, mirrors, liquor, fire arms, gun powder and numerous other European trade goods but were somewhat innocent because they had no real idea of what future awaited their brethren. The exchange of items is not peculiar to Africa, as Benson shrewdly observed that this was the same strategy used to sell Joseph, a Jew, into Egypt as a slave by his own brothers.

Very few of the slave raiders got to slave coasts. Most accounts reveal that there existed a group of traders that represented wholesalers—African slavers—these brought the slaves to resell to the European slavers, who had no direct access to the West African societies. The African society, like any other society, has untrustworthy fellows, crooks and felonious citizens, despots who were encouraged and given military capability by the Europeans to raid and capture their own people.

Nevertheless, West Africans, up until the abolition of slavery and perhaps several years of being colonized, had no exact idea of what happened to their kindred and the offspring of those that had been sold off. They surely could not have imagined that a great percentage met with death even before they passed the Atlantic; neither did it occur to them that such horrid treatment could be meted out on human beings while on the slave ships or the extreme psychological significance the slave traffic represented, nor the deathly experience of those that stepped into the new world.

Bode Sowande in a most graphic way describes a transaction between a slave raider and the middlemen. The slave raider had become discontented with the terms of the middleman and decided to trade his merchandise at the Slave Coast.

Sidney: *That strong man...*
Ayinde: *The jungle warrior? It is his slaves that*
 are up for sale. It is his first visit to the

Coast.

Sidney: *Should be his last. A horse of a man. Good for long hours on the field. Would breed more of his type too. What would you charge as commission?*

Ayinde: *Bargain for the prince or his own head?*

Sidney: *I like that method most, old man; we have done it before. They will not know and just like that we'll spring a trap on him. So tense his sinews. Horse of a man. A well-bred horse. I want him; old man what will be your commission?* (Bode Sowande, 1990: 22).

Sowande depicts in this scene, the extreme foul play that was the order among Europeans slavers, the slave traders and slave raiders. Benson (2001), in her account confirms this model in trade as a section of her work is subtitled: 'Bred like horses'. She echoes the degradation suggested in Sowande's play. This was a confirmation of the plans and intentions of the Europeans, which was to keep and breed a generation of humans whose dignity had been eroded.

A very large part of the degradation was the breeding of the slave after arrival at their destination. In fact it takes little imagination to see that the science of inter breeding probably received a sharp infusion during the era of slavery. There is nothing that rats as experimental animals can tell us that human experiments at a leisurely pace over hundreds of years could not have accomplished. Any small average of children per landed slave can easily give us the numbers of well over one hundred million Africans and their direct descendants who were affected by the slave trade in the Americas (52)

The Europeans did not only breed Africans but took the female slaves as mistresses, satisfying their sexual needs while raising a

new breed – mulattoes – who though were the offspring of the Europeans, had no more value than the offspring of the African slave.

Irrespective of the fact that medieval history glosses over the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade, Portugal had control of the exportation of slaves from Africa. It was also the last European country to abolish the trade, and continued to work ex-slaves as contract labourers after the slave trade was abolished.

By the 1450s, they (the Portuguese) had made direct contact with the West African Slave Trade, buying slaves along the coast from Argum Island Southward to the Senegal and Gambian rivers and shipping them back to Europe by sea (Curtin, 1971: 24)

The European empires, after their earlier experiences, lacked a major resource in their expansion scheme. This was humanpower. They had discovered that their own people could not cope with the weather and the conditions under which they were meant to work in the tropics. The alternatives were the Africans who were considered suitable substitute; they lived in the tropics, had vast agricultural and livestock keeping experience, and they were physically very strong.

The planters at the time explained the superiority of Africans to European labour saying that Africans could work in hot climates while Europeans could not. This belief became in time one of the corner stones of pseudo-scientific racism, though scientists now recognise that physical type has little or nothing to do with tolerance to hot weather (251-252)

From about 1450 to the close of the century, African slaves were obtained mostly from along the West Coast with the cooperation of African merchants and kings. Slaves were traded for goods such as cowries, beads, shells, mirrors, textiles, guns and ammunition. Firearms were of great significance because they helped to expand territories of Kingdoms that promoted slave raiding. A regional breakdown of slave exports reveals that a total of 10,240,200 slaves were captured. The number captured in the territory this work covers were:

Gold Coast	-	1,035,600 10.1%
Bight of Benin	-	2,016,200 19.7%
Bight of Biafra	-	1,463,700 14.3%

Thus, the three areas accounted for 44.1 percent of the total figure (Lovejoy, 2000: 367). A large number of the slaves died before they reached their destinations as a result of the forced marches, the chaining, malnutrition and sicknesses. The conditions of slave existence on ships were also horrible.

The Equiano Story

The narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, *The African*, written by himself, and afterwards abridged and edited by Paul Edwards as *Equiano's Travels* was first published in 1789. This indicates that it was neither written in the heart of the medieval period nor published at the same time. The work is however, a symbolic representation and an eyewitness account of the details of the Trans Atlantic slave trade, which started during the medieval period. The work established 'a sense of history' (Jones, 1978) and was a necessary and desirable form of propaganda against slave trade. Therefore, every phase in Equiano's life is taken to represent the various stages of slave experience.

Cultural Setting

The pattern of the work follows a conventional autobiographical sequence, which starts by depicting the early stage of the author's existence. Equiano recounts his childhood years with relish and nostalgia as he fondly remembers his family (his father, a chief, his mother to whom he was so attached, and his younger sister) and the people of his community.

He gives a detailed geographical description of his hometown within the limit of his knowledge of geography at the time. He describes it as 'a remote and fertile area of which called Eboe... situated in a charming fruitful vale named Essaka' (Edwards, 1982: 1). Equiano narrates the system of government, especially judgments in relation to the concept of justice and fairness as well as the concept of slavery in Africa.

In Eboeland, cases of kidnap or adultery were punished with slavery or death (Edwards, 1982: 2). Slaves in the original African concept were merely used for household work and were not dehumanized. In terms of accommodation, 'Each master of a family has a large square piece of ground... within this are his houses to accommodate his family and slaves' (Edwards, 1982: 3). There were times when slaves were sold to outsiders, 'but they were only prisoners of war or such among us as had been convicted of kidnapping, or adultery, and such other crimes which we esteemed heinous' (Edwards, 1982: 7).

Trade amongst the African community often brought together people from far places. Such itinerant traders were described by Equiano as 'Stout mahogany coloured men from the Southwest of us' (7) called Oye Eboe. These men carried great sacks, which, as Equiano discovered after his kidnap, were used to steal men into slavery.

The significant role the African rulers played in the slave raiding campaign, Equiano concludes, was out of greed:

Perhaps they were incited to this by those traders who brought the European goods I mentioned amongst us. Such a mode of obtaining slaves in Africa is common, and I believe more are procured this way and by kidnapping than any other. When a trader wants slaves he applies to the chief for them and tempts him with his wares. (9)

It had got to a stage where people were ready for such slave raiding attacks. The greedy Chiefs and their troops were punished, and in cases where they failed, they were in turn captured as slaves or held up for ransom. The standard of living of African slaves is thus juxtaposed with those who were taken overseas,

Those prisoners that were not sold or redeemed we kept as slaves; but how different was their condition from that of 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 (except that they were not permitted to eat with those who were free born)... some of these slaves have even slaves under them as their own property and for their own use (10).

Equiano recounts his capture by local raiders as taking place on a day when the grown up members of his father's large family were away. 'Two men and a woman got over our walls, and in a moment seized us both, and without giving us time to cry out or make resistance they stopped our mouths and ran off with us into the nearest woods' (16).

Equiano and his sister were taken far away and carried westward and southward before he ended up in the slave ship bound for West Indies about six to seven months after his kidnap. Equiano portrays

the horrific experience of the slaves who had no idea of their destination through the seacoast and the slave ship. He uses this chapter to depict the psychological devastation the slaves suffered especially at this point. He was convinced that he had

gotten into a world of bad spirit and that they were going to kill me...Such were the horrors of my view and fears at the moment ... when I looked around the ship, I saw... a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow...Quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted (25).

The setting of the ship was such that it was crammed up with slaves who were in chains and wails. 'The whole ship's cargo was confined together. The closeness of the place and the heat of the climate added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each scarcely had room to turn himself...' (28). Some of the slaves were suffocated and the odious perspiration made many sick:

...the air soon became unfit for respiration from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves of which many died...This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains...The shrieks of the women and the groans of the dying rendered the whole place a scene of horror almost inconceivable. (28-29).

The cruelties of the white men were unbelievable. Slaves were flogged for not eating. Those who sought escape routes through death by leaping into the ocean were sought after and those who were found were severely dealt with. To Equiano, these people

'looked and acted in ... so savage a manner; for I had never seen among my people such instances of brutal cruelty' (27). This attitude was not restricted only to the blacks but even to some whites on themselves. There was an instance witnessed by Equiano that a white was beaten to death and thrown over board.

Cultural and Psychological Enslavement

There invariably occurred the loss of identity, especially cultural and personal, as slaves were given names that suited the whims of their masters. Equiano was first called Jacob and aboard the ship, he was renamed Michael. He was later renamed Gustavus Vassa, a name against which he rebelled but was eventually known as.

It dawned on him as he got to England that the trade had dehumanized the crew of the slave ships, though he was to discover some whites who were more humane. He wrote of a certain Richard Baker as having a mind superior to prejudice, being a faithful friend, a kind interpreter who was not 'ashamed to notice, to associate with, and to be the friend and instructor of one who was ignorant, a stranger, of a different complexion, and a slave!' (37).

Equiano was altogether fortunate again that he was claimed as a slave under Michael Henry Pascal who was a lieutenant in the Royal Navy and who also had in his possession a trading ship. He, therefore, never worked on a plantation except supervision and purchase of both produce and slaves for his master towards the very end of his own slavery. On the voyage to England (with Pascal) a battle ensued between their fleet and the French fleet. There he remained a ship hand that was kindly used by the crew on board and had plenty to eat despite the war at sea.

Being treated thus well gave Equiano hope and he started thinking of how he could be freed and work for himself. His mentors and tutors on the ship, Captain Clerk and Daniel Queen, helped a lot to educate him; their utterances persuaded him that his master could no longer resell him and this gave him hope and high spirits. To

Equiano's dismay and despair his master decided to sell him after his faithfulness. In his dejection, he laments:

But I have served him...many years, he has taken all my wages and prize - money, for I got one six pence during the war; beside this I have been baptized, and by the laws of the land no man has a right to sell me... I had heard a lawyer and others at different times tell my master so (59).

The psychological consequence of his disappointment in a master he had served with great diligence was a death wish: 'I reproached my fate and wished I had never been born... I called on death to relieve me the horrors I felt and dreaded that I may be in that place "where slaves are free and men oppress no more"' (61-62). At the sight of Montserrat, his new destination, he experienced fresh horror, images of 'misery, stripes and chains' came to him and he once again called on God to strike him dead.

Working Relationship between Masters and Slaves

Equiano captures the working relationship between masters and slaves in the chapter he titles 'Master and Slaves'. He was resold to a certain Robert King who purchased him on account of the testimony of his good character. Equiano still pleaded to be taken back to England and not left in West Indies. He was told that King dwells in Philadelphia and not West Indies and was the best master in the entire Island he lived in. Serving king, Olaudah Equiano discovered that the report he had heard of him was true and that he would rather part with his slaves than ill-treat them. This made his slaves faithful to him and many other slaves envy his slaves.

Equiano also observes that in West Indies not only planters had slaves, many others purchased slaves so as to hire them out to plantation owners for wages, out of which the slaves were given scanty allowance for their daily upkeep. Many slaves would rather work for Robert King, known to be a man of compassion who

would offer them food as they worked for him. Some of these poor souls were often denied their daily allowance by their owners who would even flog them for asking for their dues.

Many times have I seen these unfortunate wretches beaten for asking for their pay and often severely flogged by their owners if they did not bring them their daily or weekly money exactly to the time (66).

There are such oppressive cases as issuing a hundred lashes for offences that are more or less pretences of negligence. There was also the case of a Governor seizing a Negro's boat, and numerous other cases. Many of these slaves escaped at the risk of their lives and reward was often offered to their fellows to bring them back dead or alive, mostly to deter others from following their example. Robert King used to send Equiano to different Islands to purchase rum and sugar, and going about these different estates, 'I had all the opportunity I could wish for to see the dreadful usage of the poor men, usage that reconciled me to my situation and made me bless God for the hands into which I had fallen' (67).

Equiano constantly noted with awe, how the Europeans expected only the best from the slaves. They were supposed to be honest, kind, amiable and hard working. He was able to distinguish two classes of the slaves, the domestic servants among which he, Equiano, was privileged to be, and the labourers, those were the ones who worked on the fields from dawn to dusk, lived in shabby makeshift structures, the ones who were resold at their master's whims because very little or in fact nothing had been invested into their lives.

Equiano was indeed fortunate; as he recounted that he was really a lucky slave. When Mr. King, his last master asked him what he could do, he had a strong testimonial, unlike millions of his contemporaries.

I told him I knew something of seamanship, and could shave and dress hair pretty well, I could refine wines, which I had learned on ship board where, I had often done it; and that I could write and understood arithmetic tolerably well ... (Edwards, 1982: 64-65).

This is confirmed in Benson's study of the African slave in Diaspora. About four million persons were estimated to be resident slaves in 1860 and these were 'divided into classes of house servants and field hands' (Benson, 2001: 56). The house servants were designated lighter duties, 'they were often mixed with the master's blood, were more educated and intelligent...' The field hands were the beasts of burden. They 'tended to be darker, the workers of the tobacco, cotton, rice and sugar plantations who normally occupied huts and tenements at the back of the master's houses' (Benson, 2001: 56).

Carey's critical biography on Equiano also agrees with this dichotomy. He records in his essay that Equiano, because of his association with his first master, Michael Pascal, became a 'very well-educated slave and therefore much too valuable to be sent into the fields' (Carey, 2003: 2). Mr. King, his last master, then had him trained as a 'gauger', and placed him in a responsibility of a modern day quality control manager and procurement manager.

This exposure and liberty to move about while sent on errands made him witness the 'worst tortures imaginable being inflicted on his fellow slaves.' This prompted him to desperately seek and achieve his own freedom.

In many of the Islands and in St. Kitts in particular, the initials of the owners of slaves were branded on them and heavy hooks, chains and instruments of torture were used. For the flimsiest offence iron muzzles, thumbscrews were also used and Equiano recalls having seen a Negro beaten till some of his bones were broken, merely for letting a pot boil over (68).

The life of a Negro is of little worth in the West Indies and this was a common knowledge. The 329th Act of the Assembly of Barbados states that if a Negro or any other slave is being punished for escaping or any other offence against his master and in the process dies, the master shall pay a fine. But,

If any man shall out of wantonness or only of bloody-mindedness, or cruel intention, willfully kills a Negro, or other slave, of his own, he shall pay to the public treasury fifteen pounds sterling, and it is the same in most, if not all of the West Indian Islands. Is not this one of the many acts of the Islands, which calls loudly for redress? And does not the assembly which enacted it deserve the appellation of savages and brutes rather, than of Christians and men? It is an act at once unmerciful, unjust and unwise... (70-71).

A French planter in Martinique displays many mulattoes who work like 'beasts of burden' on his plantation and he proudly describes them as all being products of his loins. Equiano claims to know similar instances and wonders if these offspring of the French planter are less his children by being gotten through a Black woman. Such fathers invariably estimate the lives of their children at no more than fifteen pounds should they be murdered out of 'wantonness and bloody mindedness!'

It was anomalous that dignity, loyalty, and gratitude were demanded of the slaves in exchange for their master's atrocities

Lynchings, whippings, hunted runaway, ruthless separation from family, rapes, and human rights violation... Everyone knows that the slave was a prisoner for life, for generations, and was expected to like it and

not resist it. This personality however made him perpetually want to escape from his physical and mental bondage. (Benson, 2001; 57)

Psychology of the Slave Trade

From Equiano's perspective, the slave trade was a war against the heart of a man. It breaks down the barriers of virtue and leads to the destruction of principles, burying all fairness in ruin. Masters, in spite of their oppressive possession of the slaves, continually abuse them, taking the women as they desire, dispossessing them of the little possession they may have, making purchases from them without intending to pay and reselling slaves in mostly undignified manner. Slaves are put into scales and weighed before selling them for prices ranging from three pence to six pence or nine pence. Equiano still could not get over the fact that after such sales, Negroes were taken, as

Wives from their husbands, and children from their parents and sent off to other islands and wherever else their merciless lords chose; and probably never more during life to see each other! (71-72).

Equiano in this chapter explains the psychology of slave trade. He states that slave trade actually debased the minds of men and robbed them of every human feeling. This is because the slave dealers are born just like other men but the terms of the slave trade turned the milk of compassion to gall in them. If the occupation of these men had been in other fields, he continued, they might just have been as human, generous as they are cruel, greedy and unjust. To him,

This traffic cannot be good; which spreads like a pestilence and taints what it touches, which violates that first natural right of mankind-equality and independency, and

gives one man a dominion over his fellows which God could never intend! For it raises the owner to a state as far above man as it depresses the slave below it, and with all the presumption of human pride, sets a distinction between them, immeasurable in extent and endless in duration! (73).

In his analysis, making slaves of men deprives them of virtue and sets in them the same conduct of cruelty, fraud, and ills that they witness in their owners, which causes them to psychologically co-exist with their owners in a warring state.

Lamenting over their dishonesty or disloyalty is absurd, Equiano reasons, when they are daily dehumanized, constantly stupefied with stripes, and kept in a state of perpetual ignorance. The gravest evil of all is the employment of the diverse instruments of torture, which are not fit to be used by a normal being on anyone. 'Are you not struck with shame and mortification to see the partakers of your nature reduced so low?' (74), Equiano asks, querying the rationale with which this manner of treatment is meted out on humans by those who appear not to dread any form of insurrection from the oppressed.

Freedom and the Mockery of Freedom

Freedom for Equiano meant being able to make extra money - forty pounds, while still serving his master, to buy himself. This he worked on but not without a preview of what the experiences of a free black slave symbolized. For them, freedom apparently still meant oppression and gross insecurity.

While still on his West India voyages, he witnessed other instances of wrong doings on other Negroes by the Europeans. These Europeans saw the slaves as part of other things, as sport or objects of amusement. Equiano recalls how once in the midst of the slaves' recreation, dancing and merry - making, the Europeans chose to molest and insult them.

He also discovered that it was against the law to marry a White and a free Black in church. In spite of these, he continually nursed the ambition of becoming free through honest and honourable means. A certain encounter in Montserrat, however, filled him with a fresh dimension of horror.

Some Europeans suddenly whisked off a young freeborn mulatto man, Joseph Clipson (who had a free wife and a child) as their property, to Bermudas. The amazing fact was that everyone on the island knew that,

from childhood he was freeborn and although he showed a certificate of his being born free in St. Kitts's and most people on board knew that he served his time to boat building and always passed for a free man, yet he was taken forcibly out of our vessel. (84).

He requested to be taken to the secretary or magistrates, which they promised to. But they did not. Rather, they carried him on their vessel the next day without any consideration for his right, nor wife's or child's. Equiano, being a witness to this and other such barbaric acts in Philadelphia, Jamaica and on other Islands had his mind opened to a new scene of horror. He, who had previously thought slavery was dreadful, discovered that 'the state of a free Negro appeared ... in some respects even worse, for they live in constant alarm for their liberty' (84).

The insults and plundering experienced without any remedy was painful as no Negro's evidence counted in any court of 'justice'. In this setting, it is not a surprise that 'slaves when mildly treated ... prefer even the misery of slavery to such a mockery of freedom...' (84). Equiano hoped to earnestly leave the West Indies and return to Old England after his freedom. He was able to pay for his freedom after saving up the required amount. Also, he still had to

express his loyalty to his captain, who made his acquisition of freedom possible by sending him on two more trips to West Indies.

Campaign against Slavery

Equiano's arrival in Plymouth, an English town brought much delight to his heart. He began to consolidate his effort as an ambassador of the Africans against slavery and slave trade. His first involvement in the leadership of his people was triggered off by the case of a former slave and friend of his, John Annis, in 1773. Annis was recaptured by his former owner, who had initially set him free; he was to be sent to the Caribbean Islands. Though this attempt to save Annis failed, it brought Equiano in contact with Granville Sharp, a prominent British abolitionist.

His second opportunity came after his conversion into the Christian faith. He went back to the Caribbean Islands and in Carey's account; he got involved in a project, which was the setting up of a new plantation or colony on the coast of Central America. Equiano took up the office of a self appointed Christian missionary, hoping to convert the indigenes of the area. Although his involvement in purchasing slaves to work on this plantation appear contradictory to his dominant stance, one could say he had a job for a living without which his actions and ideologies conflict.

Equiano however, associated with the Ameliorationists, a movement that took off in the mid 1770s, they were

A growing number of people who argued that just because people were slaves didn't mean that they should be treated cruelly. These people sought to ameliorate the conditions of the slaves by stopping corporal punishment, by making sure the slaves had access to decent housing, Food and medical care (Carey, 2003: 3).

At these levels of relationship and interaction with the European's slavers, the Ameliorationists and the Abolitionists, Equiano became furnished with enough experience and conviction, especially with his faith in the European God, to pursue a humanitarian agenda, which led him to declare the following:

I hope to have the satisfaction of seeing the renovation of liberty and justice resting on the British government to vindicate the honor of our common nature (157)

Equiano further proposes that the inhuman traffic of slavery be juxtaposed with the system of commerce and growth in Europe: 'A commercial intercourse with Africa opens an inexhaustible source of wealth to the manufacturing interests of Great Britain, and to all which the slave trade is an objection. (158)

From Equiano's perspective, these interests and the other interests are synonymous and the abolition of slavery will be of universal benefit.

Tortures, murder and every other imaginable barbarity and iniquity are practised upon the poor slaves with impunity. I hope the slave trade will be abolished. I pray it may be an event at hand. The great body of manufacturers uniting in the cause will considerably facilitate and expedite it: and as I have already stated, it is most substantially their interest and advantage and as well as the nation's at large except for those persons concerned in manufacturing neck yokes, collars, chains, hand cuffs, leg bolts, drags, thumbscrews, iron muzzles and coffins, cats, scourges, and other Instruments of torture used in the slave trade (159).

Historically, Equiano leaves a legacy through this account of his experience. He gives an eyewitness account of about fifteen different islands where the treatment of the slaves was blood-curdling. He so much believes in the impact of this historical narrative that he states that the history of an island or even a plantation 'might serve for a history of the whole' (73). This by implication signifies that what the narrative does is to randomly capture and unify the events that make up the Equiano's story: of his own life, slavery, and the lives of people (both the captors and the captives) in his environment and in earlier years that had no record.

The appendixes that are included reveal the impact of Equiano's autobiography in an age when slave trade was not yet abolished. He wrote in a letter that while on a journey, he sold 1,900 copies of his narrative. He was planning to go on another trip with the 5th edition of his narrative after a short honeymoon with his wife after his proposed wedding.

The legacy Equiano leaves transcends the narrative in print. At the time of his writing, he was propagating the abolition of the slave trade. His purpose was freedom for the oppressed. His campaign was of 'much use to the cause of the abolition of the accursed slave trade' (176). He also recalls that Dr. Baker, a gentleman of the committee in which he was appointed commissary, rated his effort and impute greatly. He was quoted to have said of Equiano that he was of 'more use to the cause than half the people in the country!'

Equiano's story exemplifies the exilic state in which the African slaves found themselves during the trade. The documentary and historical nature of this autobiographical narrative fulfils an essential role in literary writing, which is that a writer ought to capture crucial issues within his environment to express the functionality of art.

Olaudah Equiano had done this with his commitment to challenge and to change the *status quo* of the African slaves who, he believed

had a lot of potentials locked up within them. He related the experiences of other people, though he remained the main motif through which he depicted the social, economic, political, and psychological setting of the age within which he lived and wrote.

This success is marked by his purchase of freedom and his ability to become learned. Thus, he was considered fit to relate with the Europeans who proposed and executed the abolition of the trade. He was appointed commissary to the 'black poor' going to Africa.

The legacy the Atlantic slave trade left for world history is enormous and largely unquantifiable. Its consequences remain permanent and prominent features in America, a continent that has become the international super power and a place where most global initiatives that affect law, economy, military and social interactions are determined. The demographic and intellectual influence of the African slavery is another dimension to the legacies of the trade on America.

The descendants of the African peoples are not just preponderant personalities through out the northern and southern Americas but are also dominant in the Caribbean Islands. The Western culture that was highly esteemed could no longer be preserved as African culture mixes with Western culture and has defined the multi-cultural American setting that now exists.

Contemporary religions in America now reflect core elements of African religion, especially in countries like Cuba, Haiti and Brazil. Music, perhaps, is another significant and undeniable area where the African influence has remained persistent and dominant. Africans gave the Western musical pattern the new identity that it has retained; examples include the jazz, blues, call-and-response singing and numerous dance styles. The musical genre known as the African American music evolved through the African slaves and their offspring.

African American music, music of the African slaves sold into slavery in the Americas and of their descendants. Early American music in the United States accommodated African musical practices with the vocabulary and structures of Euro-American music (Encarta, 2003).

The spiritual was perhaps the most affected genre where African influence became preponderant; there were, however, secular music and both forms were performed in various styles. For instance, the spirituals, cries, calls or work songs were performed without musical accompaniment. This is called a *cappella*, a form of performance that has survived into the present generation of Gospel music.

The other secular songs were backed up with musical instruments that were predominantly of the African origin: drums, the banjo, flutes and other musical instruments became established in the African-American and later Euro-American music. The dance, steps and styles were therefore naturally suited for these hybrid musicals. The linguistic and cultural influences of Africa remain dominant today in some parts of America. For instance, 'the Gullah dialect of coastal South Carolina retains much African vocabulary, family practices, architecture, foods, dress and more' (Wright, 2003: 7).

A more encapsulating issue however is the growth, persistence and effect of racism in the Western world and the psychological degradation and inferiority of Africans that evolved in Africa because of the trade and the colonial experience that followed it.

Equiano is able to showcase the humanity of the African and demystify the theories that ascertained the black man as a different and even a sub-human race. Carey, in his account, states that Equiano proved through the coherence of his writing and the feats he accomplished in his adventurous life that the African was not

incapable of doing what a European can if given the exact circumstance.

The status of an African descendant in America and certain parts of the World today is largely determined by the fact that their ancestors were slaves. The colour of the skin of the African had become representative of the slave status and this has constantly bred racist tendencies.

The Europeans – the slaves master, also needed certain theories in enforcing the debasement of the African slave as they were punished beyond the limits and the norms of any civil law and had to justify the inhuman and sub-human treatment and punishments; some of which Equiano captured in his autobiography by claiming that Africans did not share the humanity of the European race. Most of the deliberate and evil propaganda have remained up till date, resulting in the negative perceptions about the African. Mostly, these qualifications were invented by the slavocracy (stakeholders in the slave trade); the parliamentarians, the plantation owners, traders and others who needed to justify their actions to the society they represented.

Most of these biases/propaganda were also used after the trade had been abolished, having utilized the African manpower to its fullest advantage, and there was then need for the African natural resources. Europe, in its quest to colonize Africa, presented it as a dark world of orangutans and apes that needed European civilization.

Equiano's title made a significant statement. With it, he reclaimed his African identity and renounced the slave name Gustaus Vassa that was given to him by his first master. Carey in Equiano's critical biography noted that a reason among which Equiano wrote was to refute the horrid, negative impression that the person of African decent today still struggles to eradicate. To him,

When Equiano refers to humanity he seems to have several things in mind. Firstly, he of course means that slavery is inhumane.... A cruel business... But as well as the overt anti-slavery agenda, there is a more subtle anti-racist project going on to dispel some of the racist myths current in eighteenth – century England. Among these was an increasingly widespread myth that Africans were either not fully human or were of a less developed branch of humanity (Carey, 5: 2003).

Equiano successfully proved that he had the same capability with other humans, Western or any other, to have been able to write a narrative of his life that qualified to be considered extraordinary with adventures, challenges well handled, opportunities well utilized, irrespective of the race or identity of the subject.

The Equiano-story generated controversies in his days and scholarly discourse till date still explores the controversial issues. Some of the reviewers of the book in Equiano's lifetime perceived it to be a political propaganda because of the economic and religious arguments, which he listed out at the end of the book. The presence of these arguments 'has strong politicising effect on the book' (Carey, 4: 2003). The placement of the points at the end of the book ensures that it continually haunts the reader after the book has been laid down. Carey therefore, agrees that the Equiano's project is a strong political act (5).

It is also considered a special sort of autobiography, a self-representation of a black, especially at a time when most blacks who had narratives gave oral accounts to the whites who look down and published these stories. He also published it by subscription and also promoted it by going on lecture tours where portions of the work were read, through the help of local abolition committees. The Equiano story, therefore, became an anti-slavery opposition document and his life, an anti-slavery evidence.

Recently, some scholars disputed Equiano's claim to have been born in Africa. This significant claim is in proving the truthfulness of Equiano's account, which was among many things, one of the first account that contained an African village setting where he claimed to have been kidnapped and an eye witness account of the journey from Africa to the new world on the slave ship.

This is not unexpected in an autobiographical work of such significance as discussed in the earlier part of this work. Vincent Carretta argues that the account of the early years and the capture of Equiano in his autobiography was a combination of information he got from books he had read about Africa and oral historical accounts of other slaves. This scholar provided evidence that remains controversial - a baptismal record and a naval muster roll, which implies that the young Equiano told people that he was born in South Carolina.

Historians and critics remain at loggerheads on this issue and put up numerous arguments. Equiano gets the dates about the ship mixed up and never used the name Equiano until he published his story. This is negated by another thought that argues that this was a very young child, suffering a traumatic experience; record keeping would not have been a concern of such a one who could neither read nor write. It was not unusual for former slaves to keep their birth name until they had a story to publish.

The concern of the argument against the validity of Equiano's story is to enforce and validate it as a deliberate concoction for propaganda while the argument for it insist that Equiano knew he was writing on a sensitive issue and that the eighteenth century readers were keen analysts who demanded the same level of honesty that is expected now.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that the autobiographical genre has in this case fulfilled both the literary and historic

functions for which it is renowned. Historically, it has left a legacy and landmark for the African slaves in exile. It is indeed an ensign of the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade that sprouted during the medieval period.

Art and its functionality in the changing *status quo* of those written about is also justified by this exemplary work that documents and propagates the condemnation of the trade by a former slave. This aided the fight against the spread of such evil amongst both the Europeans that were not directly involved in the trade, and the lawmakers in Europe who could not claim to be ignorant of the European participation in the trade. The eventual abolition of the trade can therefore not be without the due acknowledgment of Equiano's work.

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