Racism And Slavery Through The Eyes Of Olaudah Equiano

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between slavery and racism using the narrative of Mr. Olaudah Equiano. His narrative helps us to understand what life as a slave was really like. Mr. Equiano has two identities. He is Olaudah Equiano, the African slave. Olaudah Equiano was the name given to him at birth (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p.. He is also Gustavus Vassa. That is the name given to him by one of his slave owners (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 45). Mr. Equiano spent many years as a slave. He encountered what it was like first-hand to be kidnapped and placed in unlivable conditions. He was moved around and sold numerous times to different slave owners, each different from the last. Some were kinder than others, but nonetheless, each contributed to slavery and in the shaping of Olaudah Equiano. At one point, Equiano is introduced to Christianity and this helped to change his mind set and helped him endure the rest of his time as a slave.

Title

Olaudah Equiano was born in West Africa (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. X).. He describes his country as “being a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 21).” They celebrated and rejoiced, but at the same time kept things simple (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 21). They did not have a lot of luxuries. I would describe them as being frugal. They lived simply and modestly in comparison to the Europeans.

Equiano’s nation consisted of strong people. Most of their work consisted of faming, harvesting, growing crops, etc. (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 24). Everyone contributed, including the children (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 24). They were taught from a very young age to work hard (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 24, 25). This probably made them more favorable in the eyes of the white men to be taken as slaves. Equiano’s people were a people of morality; however, they did take part in slavery. They only sold those who were prisoners or had committed crimes (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 24), which I guess was meant to justify their participation in slavery. As for religion, they practiced monotheism (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 26). They believed that there was only one creator. Mr. Equiano compares to the Jews, because they practiced circumcision and had many purifications and washing ceremonies (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 28).

The traditions, languages, and customs of Olaudah Equiano’s people were completely different from those of the Europeans. Because of this, he stays that the Africans are viewed as inferior, when really, they just have not been taught the ways and languages of the Europeans (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 31). Their African languages and traditions are all they know. He says that Europeans should remember that “they were once uncivilized and barbarous (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 31).”

When Olaudah Equiano was eleven years old, he and his sister were kidnapped and eventually they were separated (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 32). Equiano had many masters, until he was

finally given to a Chieftan in what he called “a pleasant country (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 33).” After some time, he was sold again and found other tribes whose language sounded like his (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 35). He even learned a few new languages. I think being sold to different masters and travelling to different places, helped shape Equiano and his thoughts.

Equiano was sold again and brought to a country that was completely foreign to him (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 37). The people were unlike anything he had seen. Their customs were completely different from his back home. When they reached sea, he saw a slave ship (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p.38). It was in that moment that Equiano lost all hope in returning to his native lands (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 39). The things he saw and experienced on that ship were dehumanizing and inhumane.

I have also noticed in this book that Equiano and the other slaves were moved around and sold a lot. It is almost as if they were viewed as worthless pieces of property to be passed around whenever the slaveowner got tired of them or did not need them anymore. As seen in this book and read about in History, slaves were treated any kind of way. They were stripped of their identities and given new names, as was Equiano. They were taught to forget their native customs and their native languages and forced to learn the European way of life. I feel as if the Europeans did this because felt threatened by the Africans. Black is often associated with being evil or threatening. The Africans were looked at as being different because of the color of their skin. So, in order to eliminate that fear, the Europeans captured some Africans and enslaved them. By doing this they had power, they were in control. Eventually, Equiano would take back that power and become free.

When Equiano was shipped off to North America, he encountered snow for the first time (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 48). He asked someone where the snow came from and who made it. He was told “a great man in the Heavens, called God” made it (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 48). This starts his journey to Christianity. After this, he went to church for the first time and he was amazed (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 48). He began to ask all kinds of questions about God and wanted to learn as much as he could. In going to church and attempting to read, I believe his view of white people began to change. His view of his situation also began to change. He was no longer afraid (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 51).

In chapter four, he says “From the various scenes I beheld on shipboard, I soon grew a stranger to terror of every kind, and was, in that respect at least, almost an Englishmen (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 56). He began to want to be an Englishman (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 56). He learned to read and write, and he got baptized (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 56, 57). Now a practicing, baptized Christian, Gustavus Vassa began to have faith in God, who is ultimately in control. On page 64, he says “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 (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 64).” Christianity now plays a big role in Gustavus Vassa’s life and he makes the choice to not be afraid of his oppressors and his masters, but to trust in God and God alone.

From this point on, Gustavus Vassa focused on religion throughout. In regard to his freedom, his believed that if it was God’s will for him to be freed, then he would be (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 93). It seems as if Gustavas has a pretty good relationship with God. He prays and mentions God often whenever he is in trouble. Alas, Gustavus Vassa had enough money to buy his freedom. As he walked to the register office, he recited Psalms 126 and praised God, in whom

he trusted (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 105). He was finally free! Obviously, this was huge deal for him. I believe that the teachings and morals that he had learned as a child helped him reach freedom, along with his knowledge and his faith. He spent a good portion of his life as a slave, travelling abroad. He encountered many people who were not African. I would have expected for him to become accustomed to their way of life as he did, which is why he considered himself and Englishmen. But because of the color of his skin, he was able to relate with his African counterparts, giving him two identities. He worked hard even though he was being oppressed. He was faithful in the “little things” and I believe that God blessed him with freedom because of it.

There were three Anglo-African writers who also had a Christian outlook and were fascinated with “books that could not talk (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 259).” These writers were James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, John Marrant, and Quobna Ottobah Cugoano. James Albert was born in Africa, sold as a slave to a Dutch Family, and encountered naval action in the Seven Years’ War just like Equiano (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 259). He also resided in England and married and Englishwoman (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 259). Quobna Ottobah Cugano was also born in African and was enslaved (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 259). He went on to live in London where he became a friend and associate of Equiano (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 259). Each of them attributed their freedom to God. It seems that many of the writers shared the same views as Equiano did on slavery. They believed that it was inhumane and not pleasing to God. They also believed that the slave trade should be abolished. It is mentioned that Christianity contains doctrines (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 280). The first doctrine communicates brotherly love (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 281). Men are commanded to treat others the same way that they would want to be treated (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 281). This cannot be fulfilled if men are taking people captive and putting them in the most terrible conditions. Mr. William Wilberforce sent petitions were made and sent to the House of Commons (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 283). The argument was made that the continuation of slavery was supported on the grounds of justice, policy, and humanity (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 285). It was also stated that other nations might try to participate in the slave trade, if it were to be abolished in Britain (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 288). It was believed by some that the abolition of the slave trade would ruin the colonies, but If the slaves were to be freed and treated fairly, they would be more likely to stay and work (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 287). Unfortunately, his request was denied (Equiano, ed. Sollors, p. 287).

Bibliography

1. Equiano, Olaudah, and Werner Sollors. The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. New York: Norton, 2001.