The Life Of Olaudah Equiano

To gain a deeper understanding of what it was like to be a slave in the 18th century I decided to spend time reading The Life of Olaudah Equiano written by he himself Olaudah Equiano. Considering the fact that this book is still being read today after the book initial publication in 1745, I assumed this book must still carry a great story. In The life of Olaudah Equiano, Equiano gives insight into his life as a former slave by describing his capture from his homeland; daily struggles of being a slave in western civilization; his way to freedom; to his voyages as a sailor; and later the impact religion had in his life. Overall, the author provides a unique look at slavery during his period of time as an African slave and I can see how this book is still readable in the 21st century. However, even though this book is readable there are some points in this book where I am highly critical of the author.

At the age of 11, Olaudah Equiano and his sister was kidnapped by slave traders and sold into slavery. Eventually him and his sister were separated from each other, being one of his first devastating moments of his life. Once Equiano arrived to the coast, he was stunned by the inhumane conditions of African slaves on slave ships. After a traumatic voyage he arrived in Barbados where he was isolated on a plantation and was later bought. Equiano was renamed Gustava Vassa by his slave master and was sold multiple times before getting the chance to buy his freedom. Once Equiano payed his way to freedom he led his life as a sailor and along the way discovered Christianity. Later in Equiano life he becomes an abolitionist to bring light to, and expose the dehumanization of slaves by Europeans.

The Life of Olaudah Equiano is an incredible book to read to get a glimpse of what it was like to be an African captured into slavery. At the start, Equiano tribute to his homeland; telling of his country customs; and his capture drew me into the book. Along with his descriptive horror stories of the tragedies he witnessed while on the slave ships. However, Equiano narrative took me time getting through because of the 18th century writing style. As I was reading, I was constantly tripped over by the old language that the book was written in. It wasn’t something that was easy to read. It also didn’t help that midway through the book he began to tell stories of his voyages which began to bore me, but I was determined to read through the rest and focus on the reading.

Equiano highlights his constant struggle of nearly dying throughout his voyages. In most of the cases he mentioned he was an inch away from death but on each occasion, he happened to coincidentally have luck by his side. It was strange how he slipped passed death so many times that it left me questioning the validity of these events. To have luck by one's side so many times just seem to be unrealistic. It was lucky for him to survive any, but he survived all. I’m not sure what the case may be but it began to sound like I was reading an elementary fiction narrative rather than a personal autobiography based on real life events.

I am suspicious of a few things in Equiano autobiography. I would question Equiano motivation to becoming a slave trader. Often in the book Equiano appears as a hypocrite. Equiano often expresses his dislike of whites so I found it strange why he would be influenced by them to become a slave trader. He mentioned, “every circumstance I met with served only to render my state more painful and heightened my apprehensions and my opinion of the cruelty of the

whites” [Equiano 34]. So why did he become a slave trader if he had built up anger against them. Plus, he himself already having had being a slave should have been a big part of his decision to not become a slave trader. Plus, knowing the fact that slave traders is what broke his family apart should have been a bigger motivation to not be influenced by it. Equiano attempts to justify him becoming a slave trader by mentioning how he participated in the slave trade and purchased slaves himself on behalf of his employer, but preferred his own people to ensure they were treated better. I think his justification is very weak because often times it was laws that ensured that slaves were lashed or tortured so it was bound for slaves to still be poorly treated whether he was their slave master or not.

Throughout the text, Equiano left me questioning the reasoning why he briefly covers some events in his life. Equiano summarizes and strip some stories of their excruciating emotions and vivid details that were aligned with them. Often times he gave some two to three sentences to stories that were more complex than what he made them out to be. Equiano left a lot of unanswered questions. He does not give a vivid picture of how terrible conditions were at the time of these events. Adding details would have supplemented the reading and would have attached emotions to the reading that I didn’t cross by. A lot of the stories he described didn’t seem as bad as I think they should have. I found this very strange for him to take those details away.

In conclusion, the life of Olaudah Equiano is a unique autobiography. I wouldn’t say this is a good representation of the mass majority of African experiences as it seems to be less intense, but it does it’s job by giving an idea of what it was like in the 1700’s. I think there are far worse accounts of what it was like to be a slave and his narrative doesn’t give us that. Equiano narrative seems like a success story more than a horror story in which I think would have been the case for most African slaves. Equiano was not enslaved for a long period of time nor experienced the same severe treatment as other slaves which may have been a big reason why events in his life seemed to not hit at home or be as emotionally attached to him as it would have been to others. Regardless of such, I would recommend this book to anyone despite the few points of contentions I may have with Equiano. I think he does a good job at providing a first-hand account into a life that few people survived to record or even recall. There were few records that existed among Africans once they arrived to western civilization because the records were burned or destroyed. So, Equiano narrative gives us an idea of what it was like during this period. In addition, the book tells us a lot about how far some Africans like Equiano himself were willing to go to get a taste of freedom. Equiano became an opportunist once he arrived in western society due to it being his only option of survival and a better life. He betrayed his own people, ideologies and customs for the sake of his freedom. Equiano adopted new means of living to survive because more often than not that was his only choice to becoming free. He knew becoming a free man in western society was his only way of initiating any sort of change for Africans in the western world. Once he did become free, he made changes that were necessary like becoming an abolitionist and spreading awareness about the inhumane treatment of African slaves, which later had an impact in the abolishment of slavery. In the end, Equiano autobiography has its own uniqueness and I understand why the book have come this far.

Work Cited

1. Equiano, Olaudah. The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or

Gustavus Vassa, the African. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014.