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Crossing Boundaries: The Cultural and Geographic Passage of Olaudah Equiano

Kamal Sharma, PhD 

Amrit Prasad Joshi 

Department of English, Ratna Rajyalaxmi Campus, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu,
Nepal

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Corresponding Authors: Kamal Sharma & Amrit Joshi, Email:

kamalsharmabaglung@gmail.com; joshi_amrit@hotmail.com

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Abstract

This article explores the cultural and geographic crossings undertaken by Olaudah Equiano as portrayed in his seminal autobiography The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings. As an African man kidnapped and enslaved, he experienced a cruel form of transatlantic slavery. In this regard, the study analyzes Equiano's navigation of different worlds and transatlantic experiences and complexities of identity formation in relation to slave identity. His movement from Nigeria, Caribbean and Verginia, though forced one, gives him opportunities to learn multiple customs and culture. Along with charting the physical displacements, the narrative underscores Equiano's evolving cultural identity while passing through multiple social, linguistic and religious contexts. The issue of crossing physical, psychological, religious and cultural boundaries in the journey is the chief concern of the paper. The questions- "Does the crossing help him form an identity? Is cultural adaptability of alien communities necessary for survival in the servitude?" - are main concerns of the study. This is a qualitative research having textual analysis as its method employed in the study. The travel theoretical insights; struggle and resilience required to cross boundaries are used in relation to the text under study. Equiano, while

crossing a numerous geographical boundaries, continues to travel extensively, mapping multiple nations and measuring the different societies along with the harsh realities of slavery and selfhood. Thus, this paper provides an approach of forced travel to servitude travel in the cultural and geographic passage where the traveller finds sense of 'Self' in the painful travelogue through double consciousness hinting two-ness – a sense of identity shaped by native culture and another by dominant culture where native people reach either through forced travel or through self-desired effort.

Keywords: autobiography, geographic displacement, cultural identity, resistance

Introduction

Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings* continues to remain a foundational text in both abolitionist literature and slave narratives while making its height as a work of autobiography literature. Born in 1745 in Eboe, once a part of current Nigeria, he undergoes a journey from servitude to a limited sense of freedom. He inquires and acquires his freedom by buying it from his master. He was kidnapped when he was just an eleven years old. Then, he has been sold to slave traders. During his long journey, he spent most of his time in the state of Virginia. He also served needy people in his journey to selfhood from servitude. He travelled extensively in/during his service to different masters. His travel through England to Holland, and then Scotland, Gibraltar, Nova Scotia, the Caribbean, Pennsylvania, Georgia, and South Carolina is marked with new learning. His objectification is materialized as he is purchased in 1763 by Robert King including other masters. His strong volition to claim his subjective position is marked during his travel which broaden his mind, increases social horizons and inculcate a new sense of identity. Amidst this context, whether crossing of Equiano helps him form an identity or the cultural adaptability of alien communities is necessary for survival are main issues. This is investigated through a qualitative research design having textual analysis as its method where the key theoretical insights are integrated to draw a conclusion.

Thus, this autobiography by Olaudah Equiano recounts a journey of being kidnapped and enslaved due to transatlantic slavery. The navigation of different worlds along with wider experiences and complexities, are problematic issues for the formation to self. The journey that he starts at eleven mapping it from Nigeria, Caribbean and Verginia along with many other gives him insights along with opportunities to learn diverse cultures. He crosses a numerous geographical boundaries, and faces harsh realities of slavery and difficulty to claim selfhood. This paper indents to study a travelogue approach to servitude forced travel in the cultural and geographic passage where Olaudah Equiano attains the sense of 'Self' in the miserable travelogue through double consciousness of Western and African perspectives.

Literature Review

After its publication in 1789, the autobiography continuously garners considerable critical attention. Ide Corley delineates abduction, transportation, and transformation of Olaudah Equiano. The journey from servitude to Manumission is a challenge to slave law. In this regards, Corley states, "In slave law, the slave is constituted as "object" rather than

as “subject” of language but manumission undoes this syntactical position. It opens the possibility for the reconstitution of the slave as subject through the acquisition of the rights of personhood; for this reason, Equiano adopts the legal parameters of selfhood towards an imaginary performance of self-mastery” (145). Shifting identity between object and subject position of a slave like Equiano intensifies the emotional turmoil and trauma of the slaves. Equiano, in the words of Corley again, de-subjectivated, “At the time of his enslavement, Equiano’s slaveholders attempt to evacuate his body of his self. As a black self, he is figuratively pushed out of the symbolic order; he is “de-subjectivated,” configured as non-subject, as object, or as absence” (151). His position in the Lacanian symbolic order is a position of absence or objectification where his freedom is a mere choice. His narrative recounts the horrible history of slavery and remains a historical document, “Equiano’s autobiography retains historical value as a literary artifact of the absolution movement” (155). His recording of the experiences make the narrative a historical artifact and literary rendering with realistic tone.

Similarly, Cathy N. Davidson observes the combination of various documents and records, “The text combines (in unequal parts) slave narrative, sea yarn, military adventure, ethnographic reportage, historical fiction, travelogue, picaresque saga, sentimental novel, allegory, tall tale, pastoral origins myth, gothic romance, conversion tale, and abolitionist tract, with different features coming to the fore at different times, and the mood vacillating accordingly” (19). The slave narrative and journey through various passages including sea ports, pastorals, and cities with an intense feeling of sentiments, saga and romance heightens the sense of complexity in the story. This exhibits a long journey that Equiano undertakes and completes enjoying the journey as a journey of freedom. His vulnerability has struck Davidson, “Torn out of a peaceful glade in Africa and submitted to the ultimate dehumanization aboard a trans-Atlantic slave ship, Equiano remains vulnerable throughout the plot” (20). His submission into dehumanization abroad the ship prepares ground for his subsequent vulnerability with no chance of escape. Furthermore, the novel for Davidson is a trauma narrative, “The Interesting Narrative is a trauma narrative in which survival, in metaphysical terms, is conditional and victory temporary and partial” (21). The protagonist, a legal slave, undergoes a series of traumatic experiences.

Peter Jaros in the similar manner talks about the struggles of Equiano along with his suffering and dehumanization. Jaros argues that Equiano/ Vassa’s rhetorical strategies pushes the shared predicament of the ex-slaves, especially Equiano- the author into the grounds of a novel, plural model of the personhood where identity is formed amidst the servitude. He represents the plural identity in the words of Jaros, “Equiano/Vassa does not simply undermine the logic of identity and the possessive individual. Rather, he asserts a plural identity . . . is will, Vassa regularly asserted that name’s capacity to authorize legal and economic performatives” (6). One thing that the slaves like Equiano understood was the importance of naming where slaves were labeled to animals via the naming. He also retains the name Gustavus Vassa. His fascination to the name ‘Gustavus Vassa’

given/named by Henry Pascal, the captain of a British trading vessel, is seen as he published his autobiography under his this name.

Identifying though names is also highlighted by Frank Kelleter. Kelleter states, “Against this background, the author’s self-identification as Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African is remarkable for two reasons. First, this self-attribution stages a public act of emancipation, because if colonial mastery involves the power of (re)naming, decolonization reverses this process by restoring to dominated subjects the power to name themselves” (70). The self-identification represents the growing identity-sensibilities among the slaves. The clear distinction between colonial mastery and decolonization is seen in the auction of African children and the process of restoring the identity through names. Kelleter again reads “Equiano’s autobiography as an example of cultural hybridity in the age of colonialism” (68) where the contact with so-called master also plays role in transformative potential of the slaves. Thus, Kelleter sees Equiano as powerful man who is not only a victim but also a post-colonial agent who attains his subjectivity at the cost of other’s subjugation. With this, the text “. . . shows how Western modes of writing and traveling endow the colonial process of intercultural encounter with an emancipatory potential” (70). The emancipatory potentiality is the outcome of mixing up with different cultures during the travel.

Covering the theme of slavery/bondage and freedom is another key aspect of novel. In this regards, Susan M. Marren sheds lights on the transgressive Self of Olaudah Equiano between bondage and liberty. He asserts, “Equiano thus manages to counter the ideological tactics that assign racial subjects essentialist identities” (95). This leads his transgressive Self to come to the fore. He extends his argument to welcome Equiano’s plural identities, “But the transgressive self must be thought of not as a stable identity or essence in itself but rather as a fluid positioning, a mode of articulation of newly imagined, radically non-binary subjectivities” (95). The transgressive self in a fluid position where the search for stable identity further degrades them.

Slavery and Selfhood of Olaudah Equiano

Olaudah Equiano’s narrative features the geographical boundaries and physical displacement, cultural boundaries and identity formation, and economic mobility and social navigation. The narrative begins with the vivid description of his life in the Igbo region of Nigeria. Explicitly stating the widely practiced slavery, he writes, “That part of Africa, known by the name of Guinea, to which the trade for slaves is carried on, extends along the coast above 3400 miles, from the Senegal to Angola, and includes a variety of kingdoms” (2). His forced removal from his society through kidnapping that finally leads to enslavement seems to shatter the readers’ composure. He writes, “only I and my dear sister were left to mind the house, 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 wood” (17). The narrator, though a child at the particular moment, is forced to travel across the geographical boundaries. Simultaneously, he learns the dying humanity as he mentions, “ but my cries had no other effect than to

make them tie me faster and stop my mouth, and then they put me into a large sack” (17). The narrator’s encounters with various landscapes and people serve as a reflection of world in flux shaped by empire and commerce. The changing geographies make the narrator learn new languages, adopt new skills, and gradually reclaim agency.

Cultural crossings are equally important in the narrator’s journey. The narrative shows the collisions of cultures of people who once lived in Africa, Europe and America. Regarding his own transport from one place to another, he writes, “The people I was sold to used to carry me very often, when I was tired, either on their shoulders or on their backs” (20). Language acquisition is another cultural marker. His own estimate of the various languages he came across is: “The languages of different nations did not totally differ, nor were they so copious as those of the Europeans, particularly the English” (20). His mastery of English enables him to learn British legal systems, economic opportunities, and authorship – an act of resistance. His writing helps him change his identity from enslaved African to a respected writer and abolitionist.

Equiano’s successful effort in saving money and eventually purchasing his freedom demonstrates a form of boundary crossing rarely emphasized in slave narratives. He mentions his interest and skill in trading: “I bought two glasses with one bit, and with the other three I bought a jug of Geneva, nearly about three pints in measure. When we came to Montserrat I sold the gin for eight bits, and the tumblers for two, so that my capital now amounted in all to a dollar” (81). His luck established him as a man of skillful trader. And this luck or knowledge disrupts the colonizers’ assumption that Africans were merely the objects of commerce.

In his journey of servitude, Equiano learns more about the injustice treatment of slavery. In this context, Katalin Orban states, “Equiano argues against slavery, especially the bad (in his terms, the cruel and incorrect) treatment of slaves, with the rhetoric of Christianity” (657). Equiano learns to resist in his travel to different parts of the world. It is worth-noticing to see the changes that Equiano achieves in his journey as shared by Orban: “Equiano/Vassa acquires the knowledge, masters the rhetoric, and is proud of it-or at least that is what he says. In his narrative he becomes a Captain” (659). Equiano’s transatlantic slave experiences serve as key insights to knowledge and liberation.

This autobiography has become a famous genre serving a resisting voice to dominant culture and religion. Equiano’s transatlantic slave experience consists of covert form of resistance in his journey to freedom from bondage. As Akiyo Ito observes, “Equiano published the Narrative in 1789, long after he had bought his freedom in 1766 and become involved with the abolitionist movement in England” (83). His buying is freedom indicates his willing to be free despite the hardship. His stance against slave trade is due to his knowledge and experiences of trans-Atlantic movement that shape his (young) mind to continue struggling for freedom. This is also reflected in his ability to resist English language which is too racial to him: “Early in the Narrative, Equiano famously challenges dominant English language representations of African cannibalism by discussing a childhood fear” (169). His ability to challenges in servitude shows his

willingness to purchase him freedom. On the one hand, he doesn't like the English language that represents the barbarism, on the other he shows a bitter picture of slavery. Equiano narrates, "When I was carried on board [the slave ship], I was immediately handled, and tossed up, to see if I were sound" (55). His health is an issue for Whites because they know that only healthy people fit into the slavery. He further narrates, "When I looked round the ship . . . and saw a large furnace of copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow" (55). The description of torture, and pathetic situation of black people, chained together in slavery makes Equiano aware of African's slavery and potential liberation.

It was against rule to have bought freedom from legal perspective; however he could get it due to his travelling experiences that broadened his mind. In this regards, Ito remarks, "No decision on the slave trade was made by Parliament during his lifetime, Equiano was quite successful in winning people's support" (84). He earned supports from different people and his story became a genre, famous in nineteenth-century America, as a foundational text for anti-slavery literature. Equiano's narrative was a part movement in national level to support the freedom and liberation for slaves to create a just and harmonious society. He also undergoes through psychological changes that occurs while meeting new people and cultural patterns as suggested by John Berry: "Acculturation is the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members" (699). While going through this mode of transformation, his self is divided in-between assimilation, separation, and integration. This further helps him develop a sense of belonging in a larger context.

Equiano's multiple experiences of multiple spaces place him at a point where he is akin as well as foreign to (new) culture. His circulation and consumption of diverse culture is a key point in his expanding horizon: ". . . incorporation and circulation, is central to production of geographical and cultural identity, according to the Interest Narrative" (Wiley 166). Wiley argues that Equiano's acquaintances with nations of Europe, other physical and cultural spaces and boundaries, benefit Africa and Africans bringing them into a circulation where they can form new identity. He has written his narrative along with his cultural contact with Europe. This implies the significance of travelling across the diverse spaces. During the journey, he connects foods and culture, and gets new insights. Wiley further writes, "For Equiano, a culture's dietary features and customs reflect and produce, moral and social codes. For instance, in the African village of Essaka, a place Equiano represents as prelapsarian, the unfallen moral and social status the people relates closely to the food they eat" (168). He means to say that the cultures with different food stuffs and eating habits/ customs influence the Narrative. Eating, he learns, is a demonstration of power and protest. He remembers how slave traders ate fish in the middle passage ignoring the hungry slaves. Refusing a person food is a cultural and individual negation of identity.

Conclusion

The cultural and geographic crossings undertaken by Olaudah Equiano while moving around African landscape and European nations, marks turning points in his life as they provide new insights into slavery and selfhood. He maps his identity along with long history of slavery. He experiences a cruel form of transatlantic slavery where he is a perpetual victim, and at the same time, he is also a learner of new cultures, languages, norms, and values. Equiano's navigation of different worlds and transatlantic experiences and complexities of identity formation in relation to slave identity offers new perspectives to him to look the world. The multiple customs and culture he acquaints along with charting the physical displacements, Equiano's evolving cultural identity while passing through multiple social, linguistic and religious contexts is bound to his attempt to resist and adapt the old/new societal issues. Thus, the crossing the borders/boundaries helps him form an identity. The cultural adaptability of alien communities is necessary for survival in the servitude. The implication behind formulation of such ideas provides a different approach to fresh researchers to study on servitude travel in the cultural and geographic context where the double consciousness of slave traveller finds sense of 'Self' in the painful travelogue.

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Dr. Kamal Sharma

Amrit Prasad Joshi

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