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## **REALISTIC PRESENTATION OF AFRICAN SOCIETY AND THE INSTITUTION OF SLAVERY IN *THE INTERESTING NARRATIVE* BY OLAUDAH EQUIANO**

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### **Résumé**

Cet article vise à démontrer *The Interesting Narrative* d'Equiano comme un texte réaliste dans sa représentation de la société africaine pré-esclavagiste et de l'histoire de la traite triangulaire des esclaves. En raison de sa représentation positive des peuples autochtones, de leurs familles et sociétés, et de sa dénonciation de la pratique de l'esclavage, ce récit se pose comme une source fiable contrairement aux opinions de certaines critiques. Pour libérer sa race du joug de l'esclavage, Equiano a utilisé sa plume pour redorer l'image du peuple noir. De ce point de vue, son récit a corroboré le fait que le continent africain était bien organisé avant l'avènement de l'institution occidentale de l'esclavage. Ensuite, il témoigne que les enfants africains ont été positivement élevés et formés pour être utiles à eux-mêmes et à la société dans son ensemble. Enfin, l'article a prouvé que la version de l'histoire décrite dans *The Interesting Narrative* sur l'esclavage triangulaire reflète à juste titre la réalité.

**Mot clés** : société africaine, éducation familiale, Afrique pré-esclavagiste, esclavage.

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### **Abstract**

This paper is based on demonstrating *The Interesting Narrative* by Equiano as a realistic text in its representation of pre-slavery African society and the history of triangular slave trade. Due to its positive depiction of the indigenous people, their families and societies, and its castigation of the practice of slavery, this narrative poses itself as a reliable source contrary to opinions of some critiques. To free his race from the yoke of slavery, Equiano used his pen to restore the image of black people. In this view, his narrative has corroborated that African mainland was a well-organized one before the inception of the western institution of slavery. Next, it bears witness that African children were positively reared and trained to be useful for themselves and the society as a whole. Last, the paper has proved that the version of the story delineated in *The Interesting Narrative* about the triangular slavery reflects rightly the reality.

Keywords: African society, family education, pre-slavery Africa<sup>1</sup>, slavery.

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<sup>1</sup> The term pre-slavery Africa is used in this study to refer to the period before the arrival of Europeans in Africa. Indeed, it is the period going back to several years before the inception of triangular slave trade.

## **Introduction**

Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* is an autobiography subscribing to the genre of slave narratives. Slave narratives are historical documents, written or even dictated by former slaves about their own experiences. More importantly, *The Interesting Narrative* is one of earliest ever first recorded documents in the history of the genre written in 1797. The validity of historical narratives does not only lie in the stories they disclose. But, they also bear witness to the real ordeals and states of minds of the enslaved people. These documents are based on realistic depictions of actual historical events that reflect the truth.

Realism, an artistic movement, emerged in the 1840s in France. At its inception, artists and writers had engaged thorough realistic and factual descriptions of events and social conditions as they truly happened. Unlike idealism, this movement pledged allegiance to actuality in its representation. Tadjibayev et al (2020) defines: "Realism is any effort to portray life as it truly is. Realism in literature was part of a wider movement in the arts to focus on ordinary people and events. In the spirit of general "realism," Realist authors opted for depictions of everyday and banal activities and experiences" (p.145). In this

regard, the indicated factual principle rooted in realism is reflected in autobiographical slave narratives especially that of Equiano, for it is focused on exposing the everyday happenings and experiences of slaves under the slavery.

The objective of this paper is to show that although Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* was written before the inception of the realistic movement, it subscribes in similar lane as the latter due to its fidelity to actuality. We seek to achieve this objective because some scholars have cast doubt on the relevance and consistence of Equiano's narrative. In doing so, the paper intends not only to remove any possible doubts about the veracity of this historical book but also demonstrate that it is one of the most reliable sources of information for the better understanding of pre-slavery African society and the history of slavery. In search of the emancipation of his race, Equiano provides a realistic narrative to expound his experiences and knowledge. In terms of the organization, the paper first presents the realistic representation African families and societies by Equiano. Then, it examines Equiano's version about the operation of the transatlantic slave trade as factually reliable. The paper finally accounts for the

significance of Equiano's text and its contributions in the struggle against slavery.

## **1. African Families and Society in *The Interesting Narrative***

### **1.1. Presenting Typical African Family**

In *The Interesting Narrative*, Equiano provides an original description of the African family as he had observed. His realistic portrayal of his early life in Eboe before being abducted is significantly informative in understanding the ins and the outs of African households in the past. In this regard, he presents the role of the father and the mother in the upbringing of a child. Then, he shows the expectations of parents for their progenies in the society.

First, the writer relates that African children were taught the basic laws, rules, and ways of conduct of the society in their families. In this view, in their early ages, parents educate them how to become warriors because this was the ambition of all African boys. To evidence the foregoing, he reports that he was trained in the art of war during his childhood: "I was trained up from my earliest years of war, my daily exercise was shooting and throwing javelins, and my mother adorned me with emblems after the manner of our greatest warriors". (Equiano, 1996, p. 13). The above truthful feature shows exactly how Africans of that epoch were awakened peoples. Teaching children in the early age the art of war was aimed to

prepare future generations to be ready to take over the reign of the community. Traditional African parents put much effort in the well rearing of their children. In this regard, Equiano recalls that both his father and his mother had their respective special role in his life.

In addition, Equiano testifies that the youngest child of a family is given a special care. For instance, he says that being the youngest son of his parents, he was therefore the favorite child. Consequently, they need the care and the protection of their families in traditional Africa. This idea is well specified in the like terms: "as I was the youngest of the sons I became, of course, the greatest favorite with my mother and was always with her" (Equiano, 1996, p.13). This excerpt implies that the affection between Equiano and his mother was mutually great. In the African context, a mother is very important in the life of a child because she is the one who provides care and protection in the early ages of a child. Without this maternal love, the child would grow weak and impacted.

It is known in some African societies that being the youngest son or daughter of parents could bring you some preferential treatment in the family. Both father and mother would have special regards for the youngest girl or boy of the family. By mentioning this element about his early

age, the writer wants to emphasize his innocence and the civilization of his kinsmen. We can therefore understand that children are both inoffensive and innocent. Regrettably for the protagonist, slavery put an end to his happiness as he could no longer benefit from all of the spoken advantages concerning parental love and protection. The above excerpt also means that children in their early age in Africa were socialized and taught the first societal and human values by their mothers, and after that, it would be the turn of their fathers.

Laziness was not encouraged in African families, and by extension African societies. That is why Equiano reveals that it was very rare to see beggars wandering in the streets: "Thus, we are all habituated to labor from our earliest years. Everyone contributes something to the common stock, and as we are unacquainted with idleness we have no beggars" (Equiano, 1996,p.7). The passage demonstrates that in the African household, children were indoctrinated to be hard workers despite their young age. They were given specific tasks to carry out. The aim of the latter was to inculcate them how to be useful for themselves and the community in general. In the light of the foregoing testimony by Equiano on indigenous Africans' child education, a study on an ethnic group, "the Maasai" in Kenya and

Northern Tanzania by Parenting in Africa Network (PAN) is a perfect illustration.

The Maasai train children, at a young age, on responsibility. Boys and girls from the age of four start to undergo training in herding lambs, checking out warts or bugs, basic milking and feeding the lambs; and eventually graduate to taking care of mature cattle. For the boys, these trainings are usually done by the young Moran, or a warrior; while young girls are taught by their mothers and grandmothers. Young girls learn house chores, fetching water from the river, collecting firewood and cooking. They are also shown how to herd lambs while playing, which helps frame their brains into handling multiple tasks, from a young age (2014, pp.7-8).

The above quote shows that indigenous African ethnic group teaches their children in early ages to be industrious. Both boys and girls are tamed to absorb their particular roles in the society. Like indicated by Equiano, the Maasai train their young boy to be warriors who are expected to assure the security of the clan in the future. As for the young girls, they are taught by their mothers to imbibe the crafts of knowledge of womanhood. This document is in direct line as what Equiano has testified in his book. The same quotation gives credit to Equiano's story as he tried to teach the world about the child education of indigenous Africans.

In the similar dynamics of giving substance to Equiano's notes on the family education in Africa, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe is a good example. The latter confirms in some ways the statement

of Equiano about the family education of pre-slavery Africans. Achebe demonstrates through *Things Fall Apart* that laziness and cowardice were the most rejected attitudes in African communities. For instance, this novel displays that the main character, Okonkwo, had known an unstable childhood due to the laziness and cowardice of his father. Okonkwo himself is presented as opposite of his father, for he made his way from rags to riches through hard work and determination. He became a renowned titled man in the community. As a precolonial man, Okonkwo's main concern was the better upbringing of his family from his wives to children:

Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children...(....). It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father. Even as a little boy he had resented his father's failure and weakness, and even now he still remembered how he had suffered when a playmate had told him that his father was agbala (Achebe,1995,p.4).

The above excerpt gives validity to Equiano's narrative as it describes how African parents reared African children in order to reserve them a happy future. The foregoing family education is even true today in most African countries mainly in Mali despite the Western influence. This true to fact information provided by Equiano on the African family and the process of the upbringing the children is

meant to defend and promote the civilization of Africans before their contact with the West. In the dynamics of instructing readers about African societies as he had experienced it, Equiano provides a realistic testimony on African society and its cultural practices with patent details in the next section.

## **1.2. African Society and its Organization**

In terms of the organization of the society, *The Interesting Narrative* presents pre-slavery Africans as having strong social and political institutions which guaranteed the social safety and the rights of the citizens in kingdoms. In this view, Equiano reveals that he was born in Eboe, a province of the kingdom of Benin. The elderly people and chiefs were charged to conduct the transaction of the government: "(...) our subjection to the king of Benin was little more nominal; for every transaction of the king of the government, as far as my slender observation extended, was conducted by the chiefs or elders of the place"(Equiano, 1996,p.1). Through the above, the writer implies that his native land was one of the provinces belonging to the kingdom of Benin. Added to that, the passage shows that the elders and the chiefs had the responsibility to control the financial operations of the kingdom. It also means that this African country had a well-

established system which ensure its development by minimizing corruptions. Money affairs were in the hands of elders, because in Africa, the oldness is the sign of wisdom. Approximately, all the chiefs were elderly people who had achieved great things in the society.

In the same way, the writer expounds that the elderly and entitled people were much respected by the whole pre-slavery African societies mainly in the kingdom of Benin. To achieve one of the mentioned titles in traditional Africa, an individual must deserve it first. For instance, he affirms that his father was the holder of one of the prestigious titles, and he was therefore much respected by the whole community: “My father was one of the those elders or chiefs I have spoken of and was styled Embrenché, a term as I remember importing the highest distinction, and signifying in our language a mark of grandeur” (Equiano, 1996, p.1). The writer goes on saying that those, who were granted the “Embrenché” title, were appointed as judges. They were given the responsibility to settle social issues just like in the Western world where judges had the duties to judge criminals and restore social misunderstandings or serve justice. This idea is illustrated by the writer certainly to evidence that indigenous people had their social and judicial organizations that fitted their

ways of life: “Those Embrenché or chief men decided about disputes and punished crimes, for which purpose they assembled together” (Equiano, 1996,p.2). The passage is also a proof that African societies were neither barbaric nor anarchic, wherein cannibalism and violence prevailed. Instead, it sustains that Africans had their own civilization, which was on the same level of degree of importance as any worldly civilization.

Besides, Equiano’s narrative recounts the lifestyle of indigenous people. It upholds that people’s living conditions were very simple and regulated by rules and values guaranteed by their customs and traditions. By drawing the attention of the reader to the realities of the living conditions of his homeland, and Africa in general, Equiano’s narrative unveils the simplicity and humbleness of native Africans as far as their ways of life and culinary activities were concerned. This idea is ascertained in like manner: “Our manner of living is entirely plain, for as yet the natives are unacquainted with those refinements in cookery... These constitute likewise the principal wealth of the country and the chief articles of commerce” (Equiano, 1996, p. 4). Through this testimony, the reader understands that before their contact with the Whites, native Africans were unconcerned with European lifestyle and

culinary activities, since the local lifestyle was simple and convenient. Added to that, the pre-colonial Africans were mainly interested in producing foodstuffs that were profitable for the entire community. For that reason, the local trading activities were based on those articles. With this stable and simple mode of life, we can sustain that the pre-slavery Africans were undeniably matured enough to establish and conduct their own trading systems without the influence of any foreign power.

Concerning the religious practices of Africans, Equiano reveals that there was a great spiritual relationship between Africans and their ancestors. It is not a secret that Africa had been a mysterious continent for many years before the advent of the white people. Magic and spiritual powers have always been part of Africans' daily life. Therefore, Equiano testifies that the departed relatives were always remembered by Africans since their spirits were presumed to be eternal. It is in this respect that he writes:

Before we taste food we always wash our hands: indeed our cleanliness on all occasions is extreme, but on this it is an indispensable ceremony. After washing, libation is made by pouring out a small portion of the drink on the floor, and tossing a small quantity of food in certain place for the spirits of the departed relations, which the natives supposed to preside over their conduct and guard them from evil (Equiano, 1996, p.4).

The foregoing is unquestionably a reliable piece of information which mirrors African societies of the past. Even today, people in some African societies still practice this ancient tradition.

After portraying some tangible African cultural assets of pre-slavery African society, Equiano bore witness to some facts relating to the bountifulness and prodigiousness of the African soils. In his narrative, he reveals that African soil responded positively to all kinds of culture. He mirrored clearly in his book that the food production in his homeland was significantly stable. All local Africans could eat their fill because of the richness and fruitfulness of the African soil: "our land is commonly rich and fruitful, and produces all kinds of vegetables in great abundance ." (Equiano, 1996, p. 6). Through this extract, it can be understood that local Africans had almost everything they could need. The tone in which this aspect is shown in the passage explains the pride and happiness of the writer. This equally means that Equiano's countrymen did not depend on any outside world for their food production. By the same token, the ex-slave reports that his people made the agriculture their main occupation in order to profit from the richness of their soil. To ascertain the fact that agriculture was

highly rated by his people, Equiano related that every member of the community young and old, men and women contributed to that activity. That situation of everyone participating in the activities of the community was very important for the prosperity of African societies in general: "Agriculture is our chief employment, and everyone, even children and women are engaged in it."(Equiano, 1996,p. 7). It means that indigenous Africans were hardworking people, self-dependent concerning their own well-beings. To ensure the spoken well-being of the whole nation, every individual contributed something to the development of their nation.

However, despite all the foregoing coherent details provided by Equiano, some scholars have tried to refute the truthfulness of Equiano's words. For instance, Potkay (2001) brings into question the details given by Equiano as to his description of his African homeland and even his birthplace: "It may be noted here that Equiano does not always transcribe his sources very exactly. Equiano's authority in calculating the extent of Guinea coast is Anthony Benezet, who had written that 'the coast [extends] for three or four thousand miles'" (Potkay, 2001, p.603). He also sustains that the details provided by Equiano might be linked to the fact that he

had come into contact with the Methodist preacher George Whitefield between July 1765 and September 1768 despite his denial: "Whitefield was in England in between July and September 1768 – Equiano may have seen Whitefield preach on some other occasion" (Potkay, 2001,p.603). The foregoing opinion is shared by a certain number of scholars who fail to take into count the realistic and true to fact dimension of Equiano's narrative. It is this context that the current study tries to show *The Interesting Narrative* as a realistic document aimed at restoring the values of pre-slavery Africa.

Hence, Equiano's realistic and precise description of the social organization of his homeland reflects the reality of the given period. Africa being a land mystery encompasses peoples of diverse cultural backgrounds. *The Interesting Narrative* was written with the intention to restore a particular biased or racist stereotypes about Africans. In that dynamics, it concerns with a truthful description of some African features which restore the humanity of Africa.

## **2. Equiano's Viewpoint on Slavery**

Another important element that renders *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* a reliable historical source is its clear and consistent depiction of the operation of transatlantic slavery.



Concerning the history of transatlantic slavery, Equiano's narrative stands undeniably as one of the most credible documents that had ever tackled the issue of slavery. This is so, because it highlights the ins and outs of the operation of slavery that cannot be refuted objectively.

The process of kidnapping is personified in the narration as witnessed and experienced by the writer himself. The evidence is that Equiano's own enslavement was done through the process of kidnapping. At this part, he gives plain accounts with clear details. However, it is important to underline that it is not all the scholars that agree on the authenticity and accuracy of Equiano's account. Some scholars suspect Equiano of narrating the story of one of his fellows he met on the course of their enslavement who might have recounted his story to him. This idea is supported in the following assertion: "Consequently, Equiano might have presented us with the actual truth in his narrative or he might have been influenced by the accounts of other slaves whom he met while he was travelling around the globe" (Lahure, 2013,p.20). Through the foregoing assertion, it is explicitly affirmed that Equiano's account was doubtful. This doubtful statement by Lahure is just a hypothesis and cannot be taken as absolute truth.

Another important aspect in *The Interesting Narrative* is the distinction it made between African type of slavery and that of Whites. Through the perspective of its writer, it presented with blatant details how different the two types of slavery were. For instance, it holds that the practice of slavery in Africa was more humane and less brutal. Slaves were not regarded as pure chattels. Their rights as human beings were respected in the community by all the free people. They were allowed to do trade and could benefit from the profits of their trade. It is evidenced in this narrative that ancient Africans of pre-slavery period had understood that permitting slaves to do trade and benefitting from the incomes of their trade guaranteed peace and harmony between them and the freemen:

But how different was their condition from that of the 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... Some of these slaves have even slaves under them as own property and for their own use (Equiano, 1996, p. 9).

This passage demonstrates the difference between African slavery and that of the West. As indicated in the extract, Equiano testifies that African slaves were humanely treated by contrast to the West. The veracity of this claim by Equiano is confirmed by Coulibaly S. A and Coulibaly Z in the following lines:

in the Empire of Mali the practice of slavery was called Djonya meaning in Bamanankan the works or activities of servants or the state of being a servant in society in conformity with his/her privileges, duties and rights. A Djon deriving from Djonya means servant instead of wrongly being called a slave. A Djon has all his rights protected and guaranteed by most precolonial African societies. He can marry the wife of his choice and in his clan; he can take the name of his choice, cook and eat the food of his choice (p.268).

In addition, many other sources back the nonviolence aspect in African style of slavery. Hence, once again, *The Interesting Narrative* has provided a plain and realistic testimony concerning the difference existing between the two styles of slavery that has been proved trustworthy by some scholars.

Thus, going backward to the period of the publication of Equiano's narrative, it has been evidenced by a number of writers that the pro-slavery Whites were the first to hold such a suspicious argument against Equiano's story: "In the first place, "they tried to asperse his character, by representing him as an impostor; and to invalidate his testimony, by accusing him of willful falsehoods. They carried the violence of their passions to such a height as to assert that he was not a native of Africa" (Mar Gallego, 2000, p.145). Here, it can be presumed that the scholars who are still dubious about the veracity of Equiano's account were certainly influenced rightly or

wrongly by proslavery Whites of the epoch of slavery. Conversely, the anti-slavery Whites, the abolitionists, approved of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, and used it to combat slavery. As the pressure got more and more high on the shoulders of pro-slavery Whites, they tried to invalidate Equiano's testimony.

Despite this controversy or doubt about whether Equiano actually depicts his own experience or not, it is obviously provable that Equiano's story reflected on the reality of pre-slavery Africans and their societies. The aforementioned proof lies on the fact that many documents written by either Africans or Europeans are on the similar wavelength with *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. Moreover, the accuracy and the lucidity with which the events of Equiano's narrative is told rendered his account undeniable realistically. In other words, the latter may be questioned, but its true-to-fact aspects cannot be proved wrong since it represents the experiences of the former enslaved Africans. Indeed, it rightly and clearly decorticates tangible facts about Africa and its indigenous people. It is now almost impossible to write or talk about the issue of the middle passage without mentioning Equiano's narrative as an illustration. This is imputed to the relevance and the precision of its narration. In the same line Mar Gallego (2000) argues that

Equiano's narrative was written for dual purposes. The first one was to facilitate and legalize the struggle of the abolitionist activists. To this end, its publication was welcome by the abolitionist movement in Britain and in America as well. The second major purpose was to enlighten and sensitize the white readership against the practice of exploitation of man by man.

Moreover, Mar Gallego (2000) discloses the immense role and contribution that *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah* had played in the British society concerning the abolition of slavery. She upholds that the publication of Equiano's narrative had a tremendous influence on British people who received it with much attention. Due to its awaking of public awareness, British parliament was pressured to take significant decisions about the slave trade:

Equiano's narrative clearly combines both purposes from the very outset: on the one hand, and despite some critics' opinions, the abolitionist aim pervades the text, as the very dedication addressed to the members of the British parliament uncompromisingly states: "May the God of Heaven inspire your hearts with peculiar benevolence on that important day when the question of Abolition is to be discussed, when thousands, in consequence of your determination, are to look for Happiness or Misery! (3)" The anti-slavery goal is at the heart of Equiano's text, its driving impulse, and not only at an abstract level!, but at a quite concrete and crucial historical moment, in which the British parliament is deciding upon it. Indeed, Equiano's dedication makes clear his involvement with and

interest in history (Gallego, 2000, p.142).

It can be construed that Equiano's narrative played a special role alongside other slave narratives in easing the pain of slaves. It also opened the door for many other former slaves to follow his footsteps by making their experiences known.

Besides, according to Mar Gallego, the special feature about *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano*, lies in the fact that unlike the other slave narratives, Equiano's narrative is concerned with narrating historical facts. Meaning, it not only delineates the history of slavery but also the historical and factual presentation of authentic African societies:

The lack of historical import ascribed to many slave narrators is thus denied in Equiano's case due to his deep concern with narrating historical events in his attempt to offer his own version, in a sense, reinterpreting them from his point of view. Following the slave narrators' motto of being true to fact, Equiano engages in the process of rewriting history to suit his abolitionist zeal (Gallego, 2000, p.142).

The extract supports that most of the narratives were written only to delineate the experiences of former slaves. That is, majority of these narratives are limited to the depiction of former slaves and experiences during bondage. However, *The Interesting Narrative* by Equiano posed as a reference that testifies not only the ordeals of slavery, but also provides blatant

description of Africa, Africans etc. There is no slave narrative that had ever talked about historical events like Equiano's narrative with such a precision.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, we may say that *The Interesting Narrative* is a testimony which highlights the realities of pre-slavery African societies as well as the operation transatlantic slave trade. This narrative was written to castigate some stereotypical opinions about Blacks, and restore the image of the indigenous Africans with a positive and actual description of their society and the Western institution of slavery. In other words, Equiano wrote his narrative to share his knowledge and experiences concerning pre-slavery African society as well as the practice of slavery in order to contribute to the emancipation of his race. Judging from the finding of the study, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* can be read as realistic nonfiction in which he displays events as they stood. In other words, this historical document has been able to provide rational painting of events that actually occurred in the life of the writer himself, and those events are reflected on the realities. All in all, Equiano's autobiography, and extension slave narratives in general can be considered as reliable historical sources for

the better understanding of the history slavery.

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