

IDENTITY MAKEOVER IN GUSTAVUS VASSA'S "THE INTERESTING NARRATIVE"

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ABSTRACT

*This article mainly discusses Gustavus Vassa's identity makeover in his work *The Interesting Narrative*. It means to make Gustavus Vassa's controversial identity public that he proclaims him as an English gentleman by makingover him in a radical transformational phase. Therefore, the investigation of his identity makeover strategically examines two his narrative strategies: his sense of audience perception and the process of getting and using his new name "Gustavus Vassa." It applies structuralist criticism and descriptive qualitative method. It focuses on analyzing and interpreting the text that shows Vassa's strategies in narrating his transformation. It results in the exposition of Vassa's identity makeover that parallels his political notions, and intentionally pictures his narrative strategies of his ultimate change from an African slave (Olaudah Equiano) into an honorable Englishman (Gustavus Vassa). His radical narrative strategies portray his long but total adjustment and sacrifice in perceiving his new identity.*

Keywords: *Identity, Narrative Strategies, Makeover, Englishman, Gustavus Vassa.*

INTRODUCTION

The Background

Contemporarily, the topic of Identity importantly stretches across history books, novels, and others. Therefore, the loss of history may tend to a loss of identity and a conforming need to discover new histories, new traditions and new identities. (Berberich, 2008).

Along with the increase of global needs, a fixed clear identity increases and technological progress extends the defined temporal-spatial boundaries and the fixed network of contacts. Consequently, the physical boundaries change and be surmounted creating a nation-state as the most stable modernity. The changing concepts of time, space, and culture, national cultural connotation will be emptied, filled, and reproduced, while national identity is encountering obscure anomie at a subjective level and has no objective reference (Liu and Turner, 2018).

Even Waal states that novels show that identity construction is a relational activity yet essential. It claims the construction of identities is always a reaction to interaction and confrontation with someone who is perceived to be radically different (makeover) (Waal, 2015)

As one of the three notable African Englishmen in eighteenth century England, Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa pays full awareness on social issues and literacy changes. The birth of literacy and learning, the African scholars and personalities are finally exposed to European culture and education when Vassa marks him as one of the new African English writers who through his writing had successfully eliminated the prejudice on the black human flesh commodity (Sandiford, 1995).

His totally new identity as an Englishman result in an endless controversy among the contemporary critics and historians whether he is an African who parallel him to an Englishman or he is an Englishman by birth. For many historians, this Interesting Narrative reflects an authenticity because of many historical and geographical facts of Equiano's description of his native land, Africa, and his travels to many places in Europe and America (Onyeoziri, 2008). However, the credibility of his

memory in regards to his native land Eboe (now it is called Ibo) becomes questionable because he was kidnapped from Eboe when he was ten years old (Onyeoziri, 2008). Accordingly, his origin becomes the subject of some new historicists' investigation of whether he is the native Eboe, Africa, or the native of the Danish island of Santa Cruz. On the other hand, for some literary critics, his memory of his native land is seen as an artistry of the author's presentation and nuance of the historical context, most parts of his narratives are very consistent with the customs, religion, and tradition of Igbo (Ibo) people in the 17th century (Onyeoziri, 2008). The mistake about memory is considered a minor problem, which is not important to debate. As a result, critics focus their investigation on the narrator's identity: whether he is an angry African who criticizes the cruelty of the slave trade and white supremacy, or he is a former slave who struggles to be like his idols "the whites." (Onyeoziri, 2008).

For some critics, Vassa is a political actor, an African English who weds the national identity (Avaramudan, 1999). To make an issue or debate more interesting is, the former slave writer such as Vassa and researchers often leave the controversy to the readers as implied by Rodger that historians and literary scholars often focus on the different emphasis to see a text of slavery (Rodgers, 2016).

However, Olaudah or Vassa's narrative strategies are relevant to the structures in literature those are projected from human consciousness (Tyson, 2006). Identity emphasizes on self and uniqueness with an opportunity to multiply on inconsistent experiences of principles, purposes, needs, worries, and concerns. However, men have the ability to adjust to the conflicts and controversial culture through language and experiences (Tyson, 2006). Meanwhile, Hogg, Terry, and White define identities as comparisons of selves and others in ideology and experience (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995).

In a similar tone, Stets and Burke claim that one's identities are composed of the self-views that emerge from the reflexive activity of self-categorization or identification in terms of membership in particular groups or roles (Hogg et al., 1995). Vassa's narrative which is actually written by himself is widely viewed as a form of autobiography, which during the nineteenth century gained popularity worldwide because of its compelling firsthand testimony against slavery (Onyeoziri, 2008). His strategies in the interesting narrative are Vassa's political notions or political selves that undermine the state of being of literacy in Britain in the eighteenth century as he writes "... Equiano situates himself at the culmination of a national culture, reworking arrangements of English literary figures..." (Plasa, 2000). Furthermore, as Ryan Hanley argues, a former slave tends to produce his/her work promoting proslavery ideology (Hanley, 2015).

According to his autobiography, Equiano was born in 1745, in the Eboe province of what is now Southeastern Nigeria. He was kidnaped at the age of ten and sold to English slave traders. He was brought to America on the horrific Middle Passage and was purchased not long afterward by a lieutenant in the British Navy, Michael Henry Pascal. He traveled at sea with Pascal during the Seven Years' War and was involved in many naval battles. It was during this period of his life that he was given the name "Gustavus Vassa" by Vascal; this was the name he went by in England thereafter. He learned how to read and write, and familiarized himself with the basis of Arithmetic. When Pascal discovered that Equiano desired his freedom, he sold him to Captain James Doran. He was then sold to the Quaker merchant Robert King, a benevolent man of whom he became a great favorite. He worked on shipping routes and in King's stores, but most distinguish himself as a sailor. For a time, he was loaned to Captain Thomas Farmer, for whom he proved a great asset. Equiano began to trade goods between ports and was ultimately able to save sufficient money to buy his freedom in 1766 (Gradesaver, n.d.).

In narratives, the structure is embodied in the form of plot formulas, such as conflict and resolutions, struggle and reconciliation, and separation and union. These plot formulas are carried out by means of character functions, which are spaces filled by the actual characters in a given story (Tyson, 2006).

Vassa's narrative that foster many critics of his controversial identity have motivated the researchers to do further research on his identity transformation established in his narratives strategies.

The Objective

The objective of the study is to find out and describe Vassa's identity makeover in his work the Interesting Narrative established in his narrative strategies.

The Theoretical Approach

This study applies structuralist criticism. For structuralism, the structure of human consciousness will appear in human's productivity and production along with his or her beliefs such as speeches, writings, or things. The ultimate objective of structuralism is to comprehend human experience fundamental structure that occurs at language level in order to examine the structures of literature or to speculate on the relationship between the structure of literature and the structure of human consciousness. Structuralism searches for a universal science that would link intuitive structures of human consciousness to all human knowledge, performance, and production (Tyson, 2006).

The Significance

This research could be learned by its readers especially Indonesian readers as an understanding of identity concepts that include their understanding on the connections among one's oppressed experience and his/her political vision, which possibly embodies his/her narrative strategies. Furthermore, it motivates other researchers to do more research in eighteenth-century or restoration works issues.

At the macro level, participation in social movement increases as one identifies with the group, is committed to the role identities within the group in comparison with other identities one claims and sees the group as corresponding closely to the important dimensions along which one defines oneself. While at the micro level, people largely feel good about themselves when they associate.

METHODOLOGY

In conducting the research, the researcher applies descriptive qualitative method. The study focuses on analyzing and interpreting the information (data) that has been gathered. The actual analysis depends on the data gathering. As mentioned by Berg that "...the overall effort will be to create descriptive accounts based on the information captured by data- collection technologies..." (Berg, 2009).

Data, the narrations or texts of Vassa's identity related to Vassa's narrative strategies, are taken from Vassa's autobiography the Interesting narrative upon which the study is mostly based. The texts are then to be analyzed using structuralism theory, seeing closely the narrative strategies employed in the texts. References such as biographical, historical, sociological, critical, and electronic accounts that reflect Vassa's narrative strategies are supportively used in the analysis.

The research presents in four chapters. The first chapter covers introduction discussing the background, the objective, the approach, and the significance of the study. The second chapter provides methodology. The third chapter discusses Vassa's identity makeover in the work. Finally, the fourth chapter draws conclusions from the study.

THE ANALISYS

Vassa's Sense of Audience

The beginning of The Interesting Narrative is the juxtaposition of Vassa's letters to the readers about the clarification of his origin, the African, which had been disturbed by the publication of the Oracle and the Star that claim as the native of the Danish island of Santa Cruz, the readers' response to the issue, Vassa's description of himself as a humble and unpretentious writer, and the readers' support to his book's publication. Some of these juxtapositions address the author, who is also the narrator as well as the character of The Interesting narrative, as Gustavus Vassa, some as Olaudah Equiano, and some as both Gustavus Vassa and Olaudah Equiano. His awareness of his readers' response, as shown in the juxtapositions, has been depicted at the very beginning of his Interesting Narrative. The feeling of "fear" of the readers' response toward his writing appears when he mentions his humbleness as an autobiographical writer and his lack of confidence of getting an appraisal from his readers. His concern is seen on the following table:

Table 1. Data 1

Page 32	Point of analysis
Desire is an addition to the basis of needs fulfilment in accordance with expectation. If it can give	His sense of audience
satisfaction to friends of all levels, it should be to promote the humanitarian interest to keep heart satisfaction and gratitude. If the request of writing done, it must have been written for the fulfilment of desire and persistence instead of the origin. Therefore, the desire can be achieved on the basis of effort and intention, and not on the admiration.	on the acceptance of his works

Vassa's writing strategy is a zigzag progress (from modest to self-reliant), and functions not only to satisfy his readers' demands of a story but also to prove his awareness and understanding of the African presence at his time in Europe as a whole.

The Process of Getting and Using His Name "Gustavus Vassa"

Vassa claims that his writing gains satisfaction to his friends, and has promoted the interest of humanity, but has not aimed to admiration.

Some critics have taken this lack of confidence for granted and may continue to examine the authenticity of his writing. However, Vassa's awareness of his readers can be considered to be his appreciative of Europeans' perception of the inability of the African, especially the slave, in literacy. Africans, exclusively slaves, are oblivious, imprudent, illiterate people who are only appreciated for

their physical asset. It is big (not easy) for a former slave writer such Vassa to convince his readers that he is more than a “human flesh.” This “panic” concept must have influenced his selection for the title of his Interesting Narrative, which includes “Written by himself.”

At the same time, Vassa shows understanding that the readers of literature in the eighteenth century are looking for reading subjects that are not the history of a saint, a hero, or a tyrant. This is depicted in Vassa’s narrative when he writes:

Table 2. Data 2

Page 31	Point of analysis
It is therefore I confess, not a little hazardous, in a private and obscure individual, and a stranger, too, thus to solicit the indulgent attention of the public; especially when I own I offer here the history of neither a saint, a hero, nor a tyrant.	His sense of audience on the reading subject familiarity

Vassa’s second ‘strategy’ immediately appears by the representation of himself as a boy without a name who recalls from his memory of his native land, Eboe where he was kidnapped and taken away from a comfort zone—a beautiful, rich land with happy and pure people. In fact, he mentions his name for the first time on page 41 after describing the geography of Eboe and its people’s way of life. In relevance to the notion of his unclear identity, it arouses questions on the authenticity of his autobiography: whether he witnesses all the cultural life in Eboe or he knows it from other sources. The idea of this possibility is echoed in his note, which invites the reader to see the series of letters, stating that “... I never saw a happier race of people than those of the kingdom of Benin,...” (Equiano, 2003).

Has Vassa taken this observation for the description of his native land or has he been inspired by it to describe more about his own country from his own memory? To whatever answer, Vassa represents himself as a literate man who has had a big interest to perceive knowledge and literacy since his infancy which contrast fact that he at the beginning was object to being called “Christian” (Vassa 64).

Before accepting his new name “Vassa,” the narrator claims himself as neither an African nor an Englishman, but rather he shows the differences between these nationalities from the eyes of an African boy who never stops searching for his identity. Although at the beginning of his writing, the narrator relates his willingness to die, rejecting any kind of food offered by his white master, his subconsciousness admires white supremacy, thinking that whites have an authority to use Africans as a means of production of capital for white. He keeps searching for the differences between a black and a white, an “inferior” and a “superior”, a slave and a master, an illiterate man and a literate one, “uncivilized” people and civilized ones, a non – Christian and a Christian, and an African and an Englishman. These questions embody in the narrator’s progress in finding what being a privileged man is, in which he sometimes refers it to his people in Eboe and sometimes refers it to his people in Eboe and sometimes to his masters, the whites.

On his note written that the author of *The Narrative*, once he uses his new name given by Captain Pascal, never uses Olaudah Equiano anymore either in public written communication instead of its appearance on the title of his book. From the narrator's description at the beginning of the narrative, we know it is not easy (almost impossible) for Equiano to accept his new name stating that.

Table 3. Data 3

Page 64	Point of analysis
He was named Gustavus Vassa by his captain and master in the ship. His objection to be named Vassa gained no success. He was forcefully remained called so, and got his fame with the same name.	His refusal on using his new name gains a torture

This objection is caused by his ways of being which are still influenced by his memory of the happiness of living in an isolated quiet land where people's way of life is determined by the providence of nature and human's physical strength. The narrator values the "uniqueness" and the innocence of his native people to accept nature's power and its purity without necessarily understanding the ideology of the power itself. Vassa writes on the table

Table 4. Data 4

Page 35	Point of analysis
Vassa and his tribes pay big attention to sanitation, such as washing their hands before meals. Besides, they do tradition of feeding their ancestor spirits	Vassa tries to act as an English man after using his new name

At the same time he devalues the arrogance and rudeness of the whites that disrespect nature and its purity as written in the following table:

Table 5. Data 5

Page 53-54	Point of analysis
I was very much struck with this difference, especially when I came among a people who did	Before fully accepts his new name,

not circumcise, and eat without washing their hands. They cook also in iron pots, and had European cutlasses and cross bows, which were unknown to us, and fought with their fits among themselves. Their women were not so modest as ours, for they eat and drank, and slept with their men. But above all, I was amazed to see no sacrifices or offerings among them.	he compares the lifestyle the Black and the English man
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However, after perceiving “Vassa” as his name, the narrator values life radically different from a natured-power way into an educated level. He uses the radical shifting value to show his sharp turning point progress in perceiving knowledge, starting from his willingness to read, to communicate with “books,” then finding ways to perform it. He gives up the ignorance of the “African” illiterate and moves to a curious “white” to gain knowledge, power, and status.

Table 6. Data 6

Page 68	Point of analysis
I have often see my master and Dick employed in reading; and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all things had a beginning; for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have to talk to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent.	Vassa finds out that books are interesting and important as the English men always read them

CONCLUSIONS

By examining the zigzag pyramid stages of Vassa’s transformation to be an “Englishman,” Vassa has placed himself as the subject of his political notion that is also called as his political self. His claiming of his identity “almost an Englishman,” embodied in his narrative strategies in term of their subject matters: his sense of audience and the process of getting his name that assigns his legal status as an Englishman has make his old-one over for a newborn persona. The concept of Africans, exclusively slaves, are oblivious, imprudent, illiterate people who are only appreciated for their physical asset is radically changed when a panic Equiano changes to a very confident Vassa.

Along with Black writers’ struggle to get works published, Vassa with his Interesting Narrative occupies the leading figures of Enlightenment thinkers, political and religious reformers, contributing so distinctively to the ultimate success of antislavery. He leaves his identity to his readers, historians,

and literary critics' investigation from his era to the present time and even in the future as a means to value his human egalitarian interest in order to provide feeling of security and just in human base, education, and social and political life of the Africans among the dominant culture in particular and of all human beings in general. Gustavus Vassa has successfully become an Englishman instead of "almost an English man." Ultimately, his sense of audience and the process of getting and using his name parallels the narrative strategies that he takes a long adjustment and even sacrifices to perceive his new name, from a denial to an acceptance of it, and finally to put it in his writing. The strategies are acknowledged by Mandell as a zigzag-pyramid.

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