

Arn't i a woman? essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman?* details the grueling experiences of the African American female slaves on Southern plantations.

White resented the fact that African American women were nearly invisible throughout historical text, because many historians failed to see them as important contributors to America's social, economic, or political development (3). Despite limited historical sources, she was determined to establish the African American woman as an intricate part of American history, and thus, White first published her novel in 1985. However, the novel has since been revised to include newly revealed sources that have been worked into the novel. *Ar'n't I a Woman?* presents African American females' struggle with race and gender through the years of slavery and Reconstruction. The novel also depicts the courage behind the female slave resistance to the sexual, racial, and psychological subjugations they faced at the hands of slave masters and their wives.

The study argues that " slave women were not submissive, subordinate, or prudish and that they were not expected to be (22). Essentially, White declares the unique and complex nature of the prejudices endured by African American females, and contends that the oppressions of their community were unlike those of the black male or white female communities. In the novel, the author proposes that the African American female slave's need to overcome three obstacles was what unavoidably separated her from the rest of society; she was black, female, and a slave, in a white male dominating society. The novel " locates black women at the intersection of racial and sexual ideologies and politics (12). " White begins by illustrating the Europeans' two major stereotypes of African American females, Jezebel and

Mammy, which would inevitably serve as slave holders' excuse for the sexual exploitation of female slaves. The term Jezebel, a seductive female slave concerned only with matters of the flesh, was used as a means of excusing miscegenation, the sexual exploitation of African American women, and the mulatto population (61).

The term Mammy, the premier house servant with expertise in all domestic matters and known for the loving way she raised the master's children, was used to symbolize race and sex relations at their best. The image of Mammy justified slavery for many white Southerners, for she reflected a positive idea that slaves somehow benefited from the institution of slavery (61). White explores the master's sexual exploitation of their female slaves, and proves this method of oppression to be the defining factor of what sets the female slaves apart from their male counterparts. Citing former slaves White writes, " Christopher Nichols, an escaped slave living in Canada, remembered how his master laid a woman on a bench, threw her clothes over her head, and whipped her.

The whipping of a thirteen-year-old Georgia slave girl also had sexual overtones. The girl was put on all fours ' sometimes her head down, and sometimes up' and beaten until froth ran from her mouth (33). " The girl's forced bodily position as well as her total helplessness to stop her master's torture blatantly reveals the forced sexual trauma many African females endured. The next major topic of discussion in the novel is the nature of female slavery, in which White highlights the labor performed by female slaves and the masters' expectations for childbearing. She describes how

African American women were expected to perform duties of labor “ with the strength of any man,” while also giving birth to multiple children.

At this point, White examines the differences between white and African American females, and the treatment they received from the white male dominant society. On the plantations, female slaves took on roles and duties that strongly contradict the traditional female roles of popular white society. As white women were placed atop pedestals and sheltered by their men, African American women were hardly seen as women at all, and therefore, treated as physically brutal as African American men. Only black women had their womanhood completely stripped of them. For me, this comparison was one of the most enlightening portions of the book. White completes her detailed analysis of the major aspects of the female slaves' lives, with a look into their family life, marital roles, and their reliance on the female slave community.

Contrary to American practice of the man overruling the household, in their role as mothers, female slaves were regarded as the central figures in the slave families. In reference to the role of mother, White writes, “ a role which was presumed legitimate independent of the father's or husband's role” (159). At anytime, fathers could be sold away from their family, but slave masters usually kept mothers with their children because they were the ones responsible for their young, and slave-owners knew that they could use the mothers' children as leverage to ensure her cooperation. Luckily, slave mothers could rely on their female slave networks to aid in child care. It was not unusual for slave mothers to be expected to fulfill dual responsibilities of

labor and child care, and therefore, they often times required intimate assistance.

The conclusion to the novel begins with an examination of the African American females' struggle for freedom. In the last chapter, White summarizes the many obstacles black women faced, beginning with the Civil War, continuing into the years of Reconstruction, and ending with Civil Rights. Maintaining focus on her theme, White demonstrates the ways in which black women's race and sex worked against them. The author ties her conclusion, regarding the resilience of the African American female, to the novel's powerful title, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, which, as you will read, may or may not have been the spoken words of civil rights/ women's rights activist and former slave, Sojourner Truth (*I do not want to give too much away*). Never before have I been quite so convinced by an author! *Ar'n't I a Woman?* is not your typical history book filled with colonial white American accounts of what occurred in the years of slavery.

Instead, White employs a wide range of historical accounts to present an unbiased historical record of what took place during the times of slavery. In the latter portion of the novel, White organizes all of her source material in a section dedicated specifically to notes and another for the bibliographical information that have been used throughout the work. The primary reason why I found White so convincing was that none of her claims seemed based solely upon her opinion, the works and testimonies of others supported them all. Her sources included plantation records, slave-owner letters and diaries, traveler's accounts, newspapers, slave narratives and ex-slave interviews- all

of which are explicitly documented in the notes section at the end of the book (22-23).

White also proves her credibility through her education credentials and professional experience. The author received her B. A. from Binghamton University, her M. A. from Columbia University, and her Ph.

D. from University of Illinois at Chicago. She is now a professor of history and co-director of the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis at Rutgers University ([www. wnorton.](http://www.wnorton.com)

com). Although the novel contains a lot of information, White does a magnificent job of conveying her subject matter in a graceful manner, without the use of a lot of difficult or technical vocabulary. Students as young as sixth grade could more than master the content presented in the novel. There is something else to appreciate about the flow of the novel.

Each chapter title is very indicative of the exact information covered in that chapter. For example, the chapter entitled The Female Slave Network obviously relates the inner workings of the female slave network on plantations. White has organized the book's material so well that I can turn to any chapter, and understand the points being made, without having to read the previous chapter(s). This is wonderful for when you're researching specific information, because you can easily locate exactly what you are looking for, based on chapter titles, and you do not have to do any extra reading. The author maintains a consistent focus on the novel's overall theme that African America female slaves were part of a unique social sector

that endured prejudices like no other group of oppressed people. She builds strong support for the novel's theme with every chapter.

White's writing contains no frivolous information. She writes every proposal with the purpose of reinforcing the theme, and the examples become the evidence used to support the concept presented. White challenges the reader to set aside all preconceived notions of black women, and to consider that society's knowledge of African American women's history has, in many ways, been manipulated by historians and molded to fit the agenda of their times. By exposing some of the more secret, nefarious sides of slavery, White forces the reader to step out of their usual comfort zone and awakens them to the brutal realities of slavery. *Ar'n't I a Woman?* also offers readers a much needed perspective on the psychological damages of slavery.

White believes " pairing the psychological with the enslaved woman's means of survival has helped us analyze many patterns that emerged after slavery (10). " I recommend *Ar'n't I a Woman?* to anyone, of any race, of either sex, and with any interests, because I believe this book has something to offer everyone. White's writing has the power to totally transform her readers' understanding, emotions, and opinions. After reading the novel, I will never again view the institution of slavery the same way. If this book does not completely change your opinion of slavery and leave you with a richer appreciation for the resilience demonstrated by the female slaves, then you have not really read it! Alexandra the Great has spoken, therefore, it is official, Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman?* is a literary masterpiece!