Entry on Mary Prince.pdf

Babacar Mbaye
ENCyclopedia OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS

Volume 2

Edited by Yolanda Williams Page
MARY PRINCE (1788–?)

BIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE

Mary Prince was born into slavery in 1788 at Brackish Pond, in Devonshire Parish, Bermuda, which was then a British colony. She grew up in the households of white slave owners such as the Darrels, the Williams, and the Prudens (Ferguson 49). Later, she was sold to Captain and Mrs. I——, at Spanish Point, and then to Mr. D——, in Turks Island. In 1810, she returned to Bermuda and lived there for eight years before she was sold to Mr. and Mrs. John Wood in Antigua where she met and married Daniel James, who was a free black carpenter and cooper. In 1827, she accompanied her owners to England and established connections with the Anti-Slavery Society in Aldermanbury in November 1828. Later, Prince refused to return to Antigua with her owners and was backed by abolitionist lawyer Thomas Pringle, the secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society. Shortly before her death, she told her story of the brutality and humanity of slavery in Bermuda, Turks Island, Antigua, and England to Susanna Strickland, a guest of the Pringles. In 1831, her story was published in England as a tract for the Anti-Slavery Society, and Mr. Pringle served as her editor and publisher (Paquet 28–29). Moira Ferguson describes Prince as “The first black British woman to ‘walk away’ from slavery and claim her freedom” and hails her narrative as “the first known recorded autobiography by a freed West Indian slave” (48).

MAJOR WORK

Prince’s narrative, The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself (1831), denounces the exploitation, oppression, exile, deprivations, anxieties, and legal barriers against people of African descent in the diaspora. The story participates in the Pan-Africanist intellectual tradition of early black intellectuals by finding within racist contexts the legal, professional, and spiritual support that could help improve the conditions of enslaved Africans. Though it is a personal account, the narrative was relevant to the lives of millions of people of African descent of the diaspora who were direct victims of slavery, racial prejudice, classism, and sexism. Using the power of eyewitness and first-person’s account, Prince describes the painful conditions in which the enslaved Africans in Bermuda and Antigua labored, revealing the immorality and brutality of slavery in the West Indies.

In order to protect herself from the violence of her owners, Prince devises tactics of resistance that draw on the strength of her black community in Antigua and Bermuda. Her first strategy is to build a family based on bloodline, gender identity, and racial solidarity. Her bloodline community is recreated when she seeks refuge from her mother after she is beaten by Mr. I——. The narrator tells us that when Prince was chased by her drunken master Captain Mr. I——, her mother hid her in a hole and brought her food at night certainly because of filial bonds but also because Prince was a young black woman whose life was in danger. Like her mother, Prince’s father comes to her rescue.
The latter uses a pacifist strategy consisting of an appeal to the conscience of the slave owner. He says: “Sir, I am sorry that my child should be forced to run away from her owner; but the treatment she has received is enough to break her heart. The sight of the wounds has nearly broke mine” (197). This anecdote reflects Prince’s ability to reconstruct her black family that slavery fragmented. Having being separated from her mother, two sisters and two brothers, Prince recreates her lost community on principles based on racial solidarity and gender unity. Her reconnection with her parents is a search for kinship that resonates the primordial importance that slaves in Antiguan society placed on family and community. In his report on the West Indies, Bryan Edwards confides that the African slaves shared a special spirit of solidarity and affection with each other, especially with people from the same countries as theirs (64–76). Through their bonding to protect their daughter from Mr. I——’s tyranny, Prince’s parents exhibit this African search for unity.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

In their interpretation of Prince’s narrative, many literary critics have represented the story as an individual’s struggle against slavery and sexism only, overlooking the importance of African survivals and consciousness in the book. In The Maroon Narrative: Caribbean Literature in English Across Boundaries, Ethnicities, and Centuries (2002), Cynthia James writes: “Although she is of African descent, she [Prince] knows neither Africa nor African parentage, and can cite no African comparisons, traditions, and customs. In her case, the famous freedom narrative opening, ‘I was born,’ records a Caribbean parentage that opens its eyes on slavery as practice and tradition” (44). Later, James contends: “In addition to being cut off at root from her African legacy, Mary Prince knows the dislocated, loveless, and unstable existence of being moved from island to island” (45). James’s thesis rejoins that of the Anti-African supporters who claimed that slavery and contact with Europeans were the only forces that shaped the traditions of the West Indian blacks. This Eurocentric perspective minimizes the complex ways in which African cultures survived in the Caribbean in ways that can be analyzed only through reinterpretation of Caribbean cultures themselves. Kamau Brathwaite states that “much of what we have come to accept as ‘literature’ is work which ignores, or is ignorant of, its African connection and aesthetic.” (204). Brathwaite’s rationale suggests the necessity for reinterpreting West Indian literature through new eyes. From this perspective, Prince’s narrative becomes a work in which the author’s individual achievements and resistance are connected with her search for an African Caribbean community that spiritually and ideologically influences her actions. To reflect the multiple sides of Prince’s identity, Sandra Pouquet Paquet argues in “The Heartbeat of a West Indian Slave: The History of Mary Prince” (1992) that Prince’s struggle in a brutal world must be understood as “an individual and collective state of mind. It is an ideology of survival and resistance. It is the well of being. It engenders a new literary tradition rooted in the values of a transplanted and transformed African community in the Caribbean” (142). While it is transformed to face new situations, the reinvented African community is not devoid of agency and hope because its resistance against oppression is inspired by age-old wisdom preserved in African and Caribbean folktale. This wisdom is apparent in the language, worldview, and search for community that Prince exhibits in her fight against racism in Bermuda, Antigua, and England.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Work by Mary Prince


Studies of Mary Prince’s Work


Babacar M’Baye