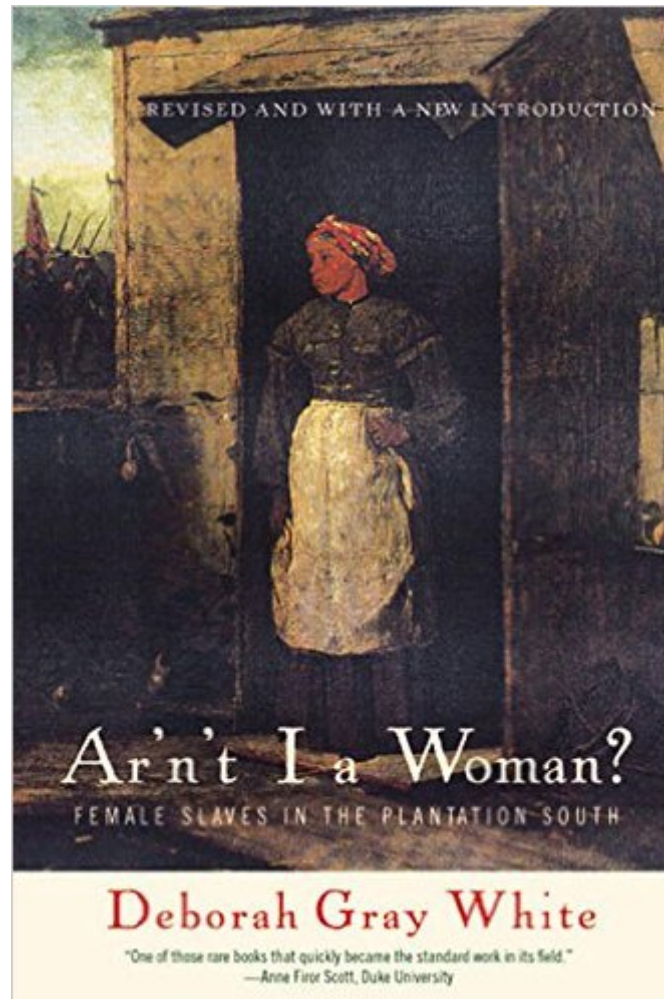


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Ar'n't I A Woman?: Female Slaves In The Plantation South



Synopsis

"This is one of those rare books that quickly became the standard work in its field. Professor White has done justice to the complexity of her subject." —Anne Firor Scott, Duke University

Living with the dual burdens of racism and sexism, slave women in the plantation South assumed roles within the family and community that contrasted sharply with traditional female roles in the larger American society. This new edition of *Ar'n't I a Woman?* reviews and updates the scholarship on slave women and the slave family, exploring new ways of understanding the intersection of race and gender and comparing the myths that stereotyped female slaves with the realities of their lives. Above all, this groundbreaking study shows us how black women experienced freedom in the Reconstruction South — their heroic struggle to gain their rights, hold their families together, resist economic and sexual oppression, and maintain their sense of womanhood against all odds.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

February is Black History Month. March is Women's History Month. I have mentioned more than once in this space, dedicated as it is to looking at material from American history and culture that may not be well-known or covered in the traditional canon, that the last couple of scholarly generations have done a great deal to enhance our knowledge of American micro-history. Nowhere is this more noticeable than in the study of American slavery and its effects on subsequent history for the society and for the former slaves. The book under review represents one such effort in bringing the previously muddled and incomplete story of the triply-oppressed black women (race, gender and class) to the surface. As the author, Deborah Gray White, has pointed out in her

introduction the general subject of the American slave trade, its place in the culture and the general effects of plantation life on the slave has been covered rather fully since the 1950's and 1960's. However, she set as her task filling the gap left by the mainly male historians (Elkins, Genovese, Apteker, et. al) who tended to treat the plantation slave population as an undifferentiated mass. Ms. Gray White undertook to correct that situation with this 1985 initial attempt to amplify the historical record. Although other, later researches have expanded this field (as a sub-set of women's history, at the very least) this is definitely the place to start. I might add that copious footnotes and bibliography give plenty of ammunition for any argument that the female slave has been under-appreciated, under-studied and misunderstood within the context of the historical dispute of the effects of slavery on the structure of the black family and black cultural life. Ms.

In the book *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, by Deborah Gray White, the reader is challenged by the author to set previous notions regarding American slave women aside to understand the truth, which has long been elusive to the majority of Americans. Over the course of the work, White shocks and appalls the reader in an attempt to inform her readers about the horrors and injustices that slave women were forced to deal with on a regular basis. In doing so, the author makes her point abundantly clear and leaves little question as to the authenticity of her research and work. White begins her work quite firmly. She discusses two of the great myths of female slavery: Jezebel and Mammy. The author promptly exposes the lie that slave women were promiscuous, dirty women with an unquenchable lust for white men. She asserts, "The choice put before many slave women was between miscegenation and the worst experiences that slavery had to offer. Not surprisingly, many chose the former" (34). As a result, the act of the slave woman giving in to the sexual advances of her white owner branded her as unchaste, a Jezebel. The second stereotype discussed is that of mammy, the nurturing black woman who cares for the white children. Both of these stereotypes are important to note, not only because of their historical significance and their supreme effect on Caucasian beliefs, but also because White ties these ideas through the rest of her work. After successfully debunking the myths regarding female slaves in America in the first chapter, White goes into great depth regarding the actual lives and hardships that slave women faced daily. For example, White paints a portrait of the female slave that depicts her as just as hard working, if not moreso, than her male counterparts.

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