

The Interweaving and Representation of Race, Gender and Empire in *Oroonoko*

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Abstract

Aphra Behn (1640-1689) was a prominent English playwright, poet, and novelist whose works were known for her witty and daring style. Her novel *Oroonoko: or the Royal Slave, A True History* (The selected texts in the paper are all from: Behn, Aphra. *Oroonoko, The Rover and Other Works*. Ed. Janet Todd. London: Penguin Books, 2003) presents a compelling text for feminist studies, the rise of the novel, slave narratives, and even autobiography. This paper will employ close reading of the text, incorporating literary theories such as the discourse of power and colonialism. It will focus on the representation of Oroonoko as a heroic figure, contextualizing the author's creative intentions within a broader social and historical context. This approach will facilitate a logical analysis of the literary images crafted by Behn, enhancing readers' comprehension of the text. Additionally, it will examine the intersectional nature of *Oroonoko* through the lenses of race, culture, gender, and power, providing insights and methodologies for better understanding the complexities of human interaction within the historical context of imperialism and offering novel perspectives on literary analysis.

Keywords

***Oroonoko*; Aphra Behn; Empire; Colonialism.**

1. INTRODUCTION

The most influential epoch-making events in history did not all occur at the artificially set turn of the century. As Basil Willey puts it, "The 'Silver Age of the European Renaissance' of the 18th century actually began in the last decade or two of the 17th century" (1). Britain in the 17th century was a period of radical thought and cultural prosperity, and also an important turning point in British history. During one of the turbulent 17th century upheavals in English history, Aphra Behn was born. As a prominent English playwright, poet, and novelist, she is widely regarded as one of the first professional female writers in English literature. Behn was "a staunch Tory at the time when Toryism first developed" (Owen 68), loyal to the Restored Stuart dynasty.

Given the extraordinary quality of Aphra Behn's narrative, John Peck and Martin Coyle argue that "it might be thought odd that Defoe, rather than Behn, is regarded as the first English novelist" (138). Behn's famous story *Oroonoko* revolves around the tragic life of the protagonist, Oroonoko, a young and noble prince from the African kingdom of Coramantien. He falls in love with Imoinda and both of them finally became slaves. As slaves, Oroonoko and Imoinda suffer deplorable treatment and witness the horrors of the plantation system. With honor and dignity, he leads a revolt against the colonists but is eventually overpowered. The tragic climax of the story sees Oroonoko and Imoinda facing a cruel fate, as Oroonoko chooses death over a life of captivity. As a result, Oroonoko killed his pregnant wife to spare her from future humiliation.

However, after his wife's death, he was overcome with extreme grief and was captured by white colonists. Ultimately Oroonoko was amputated to death.

As a spy, Behn deviates from her original social background and has the opportunity to venture into a new world, which undoubtedly enriches her experience of various conflicting ideas more than her contemporaries. Therefore, as a unique female writer, Behn further reflects the contradictory nature of the narrator in the book through the characterization of the protagonist. Just as the oxymoron in the subtitle "the Royal Slave" suggests, the central character in her writing is not a traditional aristocrat, but rather a African prince who was transported to the American colonies as a slave: "a dislocated protagonist who embodies both noble lineage and slave status"(Cao 28). Despite facing the restrictions and challenges imposed on women in society at that time, Behn, through her personal writing, reveals the underlying social consciousness and permeates the complexity of the contemporary society into the text, particularly evident in the contradictory portrayal of the protagonist, Oroonoko.

Behn employs aristocratic romantic discourse to describe the image of the black character, and the evident contradiction exists in Oroonoko himself. He is both an African nobleman and a slave sold to the Caribbean, engaging in diverse adventurous activities in different spaces. "The novella also figures a European world for which Oroonoko is a more direct ideal"(Brown 2001: 196). So this paper will focus on analyzing the identity connotations of Oroonoko through an examination of his conflicting identities and actions.

2. THE PRINCE: THE IMAGINATION OF THE OTHER

Janet Todd, an expert in 18th-century British literary studies, points out that Oroonoko's blackness and slave status are aptly described, "but, beyond the issue of colonialism and race, which were to become important themes in the eighteenth century, is the seventeenth-century theme of aristocracy"(Todd 1992: 19). Oroonoko's most notable identity is his status as a prince. As a prince of Coramantien, Oroonoko possesses noble lineage and the authority of a ruler.

Oroonoko is a black prince, and one of the ways in which he differs from other black people is immediately evident in his exceptional physical appearance and physique. In the novel, he is described as tall with smooth, tawny-brown skin: "a perfect ebony, or polished jet"(81). He has a handsome face, captivating eyes, and a thick, glossy head of curly black hair. These characteristics align with the aesthetic standards of the time for an ideal handsome man as perceived by Europeans. "His nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat. His mouth, the finest shaped that could be seen; far from those great turned lips, which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes"(81). He possesses a noble temperament. Clearly, Behn emphasizes Oroonoko's superiority in appearance by highlighting his possession of typical European physical features, such as a prominent nose. In particular, Oroonoko's distinctive traits that set him apart from other black individuals earn him favor from the author. This ideal European beauty sets Oroonoko apart from other black people, making him an anomaly within his own community and evoking reverence for him as a prince.

In addition to the noticeable physical differences, Behn bestows upon Oroonoko a noble set of thoughts and behavioral principles. "He had nothing of barbarity in his nature, but in all points addressed himself as if his education had been in some European court"(80). Oroonoko lacks any trace of savagery in his nature and he conducts himself with utmost propriety. Furthermore, Oroonoko has received a Christian education and he is fluent in English and French, which enables him to comport himself appropriately and gracefully in European society. His demeanor aligns with the behavioral standards and etiquette of European nobility at that time, making him more readily accepted by Europeans. Even critics uninterested in ideological analysis acknowledge that Oroonoko "functions in the story as an embodiment of just those

values affirmed by European societies under the influence of Christianity and the humanistic tradition”(Link 140-41).

As a royal heir, Oroonoko, the prince, exhibits qualities of loyalty and courage in the novel. “He got that real greatness of soul, those refined notions of true honour, that absolute generosity, and that softness that was capable of the highest passions of love and gallantry”(80). For instance, he wholeheartedly considers the well-being of his country, bravely resists invaders, and ultimately chooses to commit suicide rather than betray his own family. These qualities align with the ideals upheld in Europe and reflect core values within European cultures.

In this way, a regal figure with noble lineage and extraordinary abilities comes to life on the pages. “The native ‘other’ is naturalized as a European aristocrat”(Brown 1987: 47). From an outward appearance, the narrator can hardly distinguish this indigenous prince from a British aristocrat. Apart from skin color, he is essentially a genuine European. His own cultural heritage takes a back seat, and Western culture dominates the entire image. Also, it is important to note that Oroonoko is based on Behn’s personal experiences abroad, and thus, the story inevitably incorporates Behn’s subjective thoughts. Language, as Benveniste states, is “organised in such a way that it allows each speaker to appropriate the entire language by designating himself as the ‘I’”(226). Therefore, it is not difficult to deduce that Behn highly values the typical physical features of Europeans and esteems the behavioral norms of traditional European aristocracy. However, it must be pointed out that European upper-class status is the product of combined factors such as wealth, talent, and social hierarchy, and such dynamics were not possible on the African continent. This imposition of false signifiers onto Oroonoko renders him as the “other”, separate from the lowly African commoners but not fully embraced by the Europeans.

3. THE SLAVE: BEING GAZED AND MARGINALIZED

Behn created, with astonishing foresight, the first “noble savage” in literary history. However, regardless of Oroonoko’s depiction as a dignified figure, he is ultimately portrayed as a black man, indicating that the reality of European white disdain for African black people persists and cannot be erased. As early as the 16th century, European nations such as Britain, the Netherlands, and France participated in the practice of slavery. In a situation where white people held absolute power, it was only natural for European whites to view African blacks as an inferior race. Whites deprived them of their rights, enslaving, trading, and colonizing them. This discriminatory mindset has permeated European history. Such racist ideas have been widely disseminated and supported in European society, further deepening the prejudice of European whites against African blacks.

Due to the nobility of his status, Oroonoko is exempted from the labor required of ordinary slaves. He can still venture outside and enjoy the company of his beautiful and coveted wife, Imoinda, creating an illusion of Oroonoko being free from enslavement. However, after becoming a slave, he undergoes certain changes to adapt to the life of a slave, conforming to the colonizers’ expectations of slave obedience and submissiveness. Such transformation not only demonstrates Oroonoko’s resilience but also exposes the prevailing class discrimination and linguistic oppression of the time. Once he becomes a slave, he comforts himself, stating at least he has a wise and virtuous master. “When he found his habit made him liable, as he thought, to be gazed at the more, he begged Trefry to give him something more befitting a slave; which he did, and took off his robes”(107-8). Oroonoko not only accepts the reality of being a slave but also consciously becomes an exemplar. When his master still allows him to dress in his former noble attire, Oroonoko pleads with Trefry to provide him with clothing more appropriate for his current slave status. This series of seemingly perplexing actions is naturally and voluntarily accepted by Oroonoko, and through changing his clothes, he aligns himself more closely with the image of the slave “Caesar”. In the situation of losing his freedom and becoming a slave,

Oroonoko unusually chooses to endure his fate with apparent joy. However, let us not forget that Oroonoko was once a valiant general on the battlefield, fighting to defend his homeland's territory and sovereignty. Faced with European enslavement, Oroonoko inexplicably chooses to submit, which goes against ordinary human nature. Furthermore, his master strips him of his name and renames him Caesar, "by that name he was received on shore at Parham-House, where he was destined a slave" (108). Naming has a performative function, with the master declaring the abolition of Oroonoko's noble prince status and giving him a new identity. "This act of naming becomes a second life granted by the master to the slave" (Lu 43). Subsequently, the narrator often refers to him by his new name Caesar, serving to appease the European colonizers. Imperialism can also be seen from a discursive perspective in the conquest of other regions. Although European slave masters outwardly show respect to Oroonoko, they have always regarded him and his people as inferior "others".

Oroonoko's status as a slave, then, embodies a paradox within British culture and the core of imperialism: the simultaneous condemnation of and reliance upon slavery as a means of economic and social control. It is understandable that colonizers generally prefer slaves who lack a sense of resistance, even though most slaves are unable to resist. In the colonial economic system, the primary role of slaves is to labor and generate wealth for their masters. Slaves who are easily trained and controlled are more likely to adapt to the rules and demands of the slave system. This type of slave is easily perceived as a resource, a selfless tool.

From this perspective, Oroonoko is far from being an authentic African royal heir; rather, he is an ideal character shaped by the author to serve colonial interests, effectively serving as "a European *philosophe* in blackface" (Craton 252). The author skillfully uses words to portray their true intentions, revealing logical connections that underlie apparent contradictions. Therefore, Oroonoko's actions represent an optimistic imagination of imperialism. What they require is a docile, obedient, and loyal slave, highlighting the desire for colonial expansion. The ultimate objective is conquest, governance, and most importantly, the establishment of a sense of superiority over others.

4. THE DEFEAT: END OF A DYNASTY

Oroonoko, an European "other" who embodies both civilized and savage qualities, as well as noble and lowly characteristics, represents the complexities of his own identity. These contradictions reach their climax when his lover Imoinda becomes pregnant. Consequently, the uprising becomes an inevitable and natural plot development. His motivation is to protect their offspring and free them from the bondage of slavery and the control of slave masters. However, Oroonoko initiates an uprising that ends before it even properly begins. If Oroonoko's ambition to break free from slavery were to be successful, it would fundamentally threaten the political and economic order of the colonizers. Greenblatt claims that "subversiveness, as I have argued, was produced by the colonial power in its own interest" (24). Therefore, his fate is inevitably tragic. European colonizers always maintain a dominant position, while slaves perpetually remain subordinate and inferior. The status of the empire remains unchanged and invincible.

In the end of the story, the white colonizers publicly execute Oroonoko as a deterrent to others. The public execution, then, has a juridico-political function. "It is a ceremonial by which a momentarily injured sovereignty is reconstituted. It restores that sovereignty by manifesting it at its most spectacular" (Foucault 48). The ending gives a detailed account of Oroonoko's punishment:

He had learned to take Tobacco, and when he was assured he should die, he desired they should give him a Pipe in his mouth, ready lighted, which they did, and the executioner came, and first cut off his members, and threw them into the fire. After that, with an ill-favoured knife, they cut off his ears and his nose, and burned them; he still smoked on, as if nothing had touched

him. Then they hacked off one of his arms, and still he bore up, and held his pipe. But at the cutting off the other arm, his head sunk, and his pipe dropped, and he gave up the ghost, without a groan, or a reproach.(140)

A noble prince of exceptional character died. Here, “the primary site for the operation of sympathy in the novella, is Oroonoko’s body”(Mallipeddi 476) In this encounter between the tortured body and responsive feminine imagination, “bodily suffering seems contagious and transitive”(Mallipeddi 489). Faced with the threat of death, Oroonoko remains remarkably calm and composed, in stark contrast to the cruelty and indifference of the executioner. Oroonoko assures them that “he would stand fixed, like a rock, and endure death so as should encourage them to die”(140). The author seems to suggest that individuals with inherent nobility, regardless of the circumstances, still possess nobility that cannot be suppressed. His composed attitude showcases his strength of will as a representative of royalty. Oroonoko’s fearless demeanor before his death mirrors the scene of King Charles I on the scaffold: “the King took off his cloak and the blue sash with his silver medallion of St George, handing them to Juxon with the word ‘Remember’... Then he stooped down, as if to look for the tip of his cane, but this time to lay his neck upon the block”(Robertson 180).

Oroonoko's body is scattered throughout various parts of the colony, vividly matching the gruesome death of King Charles I. From this perspective, the author's emotional description of Oroonoko's punishment and death at the end can be seen as a heartfelt elegy. Behn was a loyal supporter of the Stuart dynasty, and in the novel, she showcases the values and spirit of the royalist faction through Oroonoko's actions. Although the royalists were defeated in political struggles, they maintained their dignity and principles.

Janet Todd argues that in Oroonoko, “Behn even lets him refuse to receive the quartered remains of the slave prince as if to redeem an anti-monarchical past”(1996: 49). If Behn had any political objectives, a more appropriate interpretation would be her promotion of royalism, satirizing Protestantism and the bourgeoisie, with incidental references to people she knew in the colonies. Behn uses the tragic plot as a medium for political propaganda, mobilizing readers’ fear, sympathy, and concern to consolidate the necessity of monarchic development.

In this light, Oroonoko’s death can also be seen as a sacrifice for an ideal. Behn employs vivid descriptions to intricately portray Oroonoko’s regal dignity and noble character, “aiming to evoke the public’s loyalty to monarchy and thus achieve the political indoctrination of Toryism, which seeks to uphold royal authority”(Zhang 52). Thus, the tragic and brutal ending of the novel gains even more powerful impact. He is willing to give his life for the sake of the monarchy’s interests. Although his efforts do not change the political landscape, his sacrifice highlights his loyalty and dedication to the royalist cause. His death becomes a symbol of the royalist faction, inspiring other supporters to remain steadfast in their beliefs and continue fighting for the ideals of the monarchy.

5. CONCLUSION

Oroonoko is both European and African, to some extent, reflects the cruelty of slavery. But it should be noted that Behn’s opposition lies in the subjugation of the people by the royal aristocracy rather than the institution of slavery itself. Behn was clearly a proponent of British colonialism, yet she objected to the violence that resulted from the establishment of trade and territorial expansion, preferring what Mary Louise Pratt describes as the “desire to subject without violence”(qtd. Frohock 448). She was a staunch royalist and, as a beneficiary of the system, was supportive of colonialism. She bestowed numerous privileges upon the plantation owners, endorsing the colonial status quo.

Through the exploration of race, gender, and power in *Oroonoko*, this paper delves into the novel’s cultural and historical implications, aiming to enhance our understanding and analysis

of similar issues in contemporary society. This, in turn, can help us better confront the challenges and problems prevalent in today's world.

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