



RESEARCH PAPER

Slavery, Racism and Colonial Ambivalence: A Postcolonial
Perspective on Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko, Or the Royal Slave: A True
History*

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ABSTRACT

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Behn's *Oroonoko*, published in 1688, is about its hero's love, rebellion, and execution in the erstwhile Dutch and English colony, Surinam. The novel reflects Behn's colonial ambivalence and her racist ideology regarding the treatment of the institution of commercial slavery and the subsequent miseries of its hero, Oroonoko. To the novelist, Oroonoko belongs to a gloomy race therefore his enslavers seem to be justified in transporting him from Africa to Surinam, the site for his dynamic and decisive confrontation against the institution of chattel slavery. Hence, the study ascertains that the novel is not an antislavery document, rather, it upholds and justifies colonial suppositions on the subject of slavery although in ambivalent manners. The current rereading of the novel goes against the interpretations that view it as a political allegory, feminist text, or a valuable document in the field of antislavery literature. Accordingly, it is evidenced how the colonizers used the institution of slavery to de-culturate and dehumanize the blacks in the colonial locations.

Introduction

This study is based on doing a postcolonial rereading of Behn's novel, *Oroonoko*, to explore how as a colonialist novelist, she upholds the institution of chattel slavery by maintaining her ethnic and cultural superiority over the Blacks in an ambivalent manner. It is argued that the novel promotes colonial thoughts to shun any resistance and is silent on the matters concerned with colonialism and commercial slavery. Rawat (1985) is of the view that an involuntary servitude imposed upon a person by another person or persons, or the absence of volition of man in his actions, or forced servitude, are all forms of slavery (p. 9). He further maintains that slavery had been prevailing in the antique world. The Roman law also endorsed slavery and empowered the masters to execute the affairs of their slaves in the way they deem appropriate (p. 14-15).

However, the institution commercial of slavery began when Columbus landed in America in 1492. Spanish and Portuguese started enslaving the Red Indians and exposed them to the hard labor of mining, a task that the red Indians could never succeed in, and therefore would prefer death through hunger strike. As a result, the Spanish plantation owners faced the problem of the workforce shortage and started importing black men and women from Africa to their Caribbean plantations. Rawat (1985) maintains that the discovery of the New World, "the invention of maritime technology in Europe, the European greed for wealth, and plantation-cum-mining economy in the New World were the root causes of the unparalleled black human traffic across the Atlantic Ocean" (p. 37).

The novel revolves around the tragic story of its protagonist, Oroonoko, who was betrayed into slavery by a shipmaster. The shipmaster invited Oroonoko to grace his vessel with his presence for dinner but very soon he realized that he had been trapped by the shipmaster and therefore he demonstrated a strong resistance to this act by decrying the captain's deception. After the capture, the shipmaster transported him to the English colony, Surinam where he was sold to the slave masters. Nowhere in her novel, Behn criticized this dehumanizing institution of exploitation. Instead of condemning the treacherous act through which Oroonoko was enslaved, she remains ambivalent and rather leaves this matter to her readers' discretion. Behn's silence on this matter is enough to register her tacit approval of the idea, presented by Du Tertre (cited in Lipking, 1997, p. 80), who remarked: "I do not know what that nation has done; but it is enough to be black to be Taken, sold, and bound into a grievous servitude that lasts for all of life" (p. 109). Moreover, Oroonoko murdered his pregnant wife, Imoinda, lest his offspring should fall prey to perpetual slavery. Oroonoko was never content with his fate and continued an untiring struggle for freedom as while urging his co-sufferers, he audaciously remarked:

at least, they shou'd be made Free in his Kingdom, and be Esteemed as his Fellow-sufferers, and Men that have the Courage, and the Bravery to attempt, at least, for Liberty; and if they Dy'd in the attempt it wou'd be more brave than to live in perpetual slavery. (p. 54)

The lines show how defiantly Oroonoko delineates the importance of the struggle for freedom in the context of the dehumanizing institution of chattel slavery. On the one hand, Behn claims that she is composing, "a true Story", on the other she serves the colonial agenda, which shows that she is also an extension of her mother country (Iqbal & Ahmad 2014, p. 936). Hence, by employing Bhabha's (1994) *The Location of Culture* as a theoretical framework, it is investigated how the novelist's colonial ambivalence renders her colonial discourse on slavery inherently flawed and contradictory by undermining her self-supposed superiority over the Blacks or colonized.

Literature Review

Fhlathuin (2007) states that after getting a license from James-1, in 1606, the London Virginia Company landed its first settlers in Jamestown in 1607 and this marked the beginning of the British Crown's colonizing mission and the slave trade in the North American territories. Surinam, the setting of the novel, fell into the hands

of the British Empire in 1650. As slavery is one of the prominent themes in *Oroonoko*, its postcolonial investigation is a significant point of our study. The institution of slavery remained in existence from the classical time of Greece and Romans to the beginning of the sixteenth century in the Atlantic. According to Taylor (2007) the reports that Columbus sent to the Monarch, confirmed the presence of 'Cannibals' in the Spanish Indies and it was mainly based on these speculative reports that "Cambial Law of 1503" was constituted, which granted the legal right to Spaniards to capture and sell any man-eating Indians. The law was instrumental in making chattel slavery a legal practice.

In "The New World of Slavery: An Introduction", Lipking (1997) discusses at length the history of the slave trade routing from the coasts of West Africa to the Caribbean Islands and at the same time, she highlights how cruelly slaves were treated on the plantations. She also brings forth the Salve-uprisings on the plantation, which were ignited especially by the runaway slaves called 'Maroons' inhabiting the mountains of Surinam and Jamaica. The institutionalizing of commercial slavery by Europe offered the colonizing powers a cheap and efficient solution to the problem of the workforce on plantations. Therefore, this commercial slavery played a significant role in the shaping of many postcolonial locations in Africa and the Caribbean. Temperley (2000) maintains that as slaves were denied education and compelled to labor under the threat of punishment, their minds were as much in bondage as their bodies. Notably, the setting of *Oroonoko* is Surinam, the colony where Behn met the protagonist of her novel, who was brought here as a slave from Coramantien, Africa. Being detached and forcefully uprooted from their immediate place and culture, the slaves found themselves in an alien world, as was the case with Oroonoko, the former African prince, enslaved treacherously and brought to the English plantation colony, Surinam. Therefore, the articles discussed in the ongoing lines are in many ways congenial to our study of *Oroonoko* as a proslavery novel.

Previous Studies on Behn's *Oroonoko*

Sherburn (1948) has admired Behn's ability to portray her protagonist as a powerful and beautiful Negro slave with a noble mind just like his body for, she keeps him impressive throughout the novel. Fogarty (1994) has argued that Behn's novella is structured around a series of discontinuities, displacements, and disjunctions because the narrator is divided between her fascination with other cultures and simultaneously showing her unremitting ethnocentrism. However, Fogarty advocates a multilayered approach to the reading of the novel as she disapproves the interpretations that attempt to stabilize the text by defining it as the mouthpiece of one particular ideology - be it colonialism, some embryonic version of feminism, or abolitionism.

Spengemann (1997) argues that *Oroonoko* should be included in American Literature because its setting is a South American country, Surinam. He admires the way Behn has constructed the plot of her novel and how she keeps her readers busy by interfering with the narration process, which is enough to include it in the category of a novel. Spencer (1986) says that although Behn was confident about her writing skills, she had grievances regarding male prejudices against the same. She is also of the view that Behn's novel showcases that the autobiographical elements in the novel

index her involvement in the narrator's position, which develops into an examination of her role as a woman and writer. Therefore, she calls it a novel of ideas and actions for it views three different cultures – the native Surinam, the European, and Coramantien, the home of Oroonoko. In her perspective, the narrator has detached herself from her European affiliations.

Brown (1997) has pointed out that Behn has developed the story in the tradition of Heroic Romance as it is clear from the characterization of Oroonoko, who is presented as having some extraordinary powers of being invincible in wars. According to Sussman (1997) violence in *Oroonoko* springs from Imoinda and Oroonoko's desires to assert their right to freedom and cultural heritage in an alien world. The above discussion shows how the critics have toiled to fasten down the thematic aspects of Behn's *Oroonoko*. It has been interpreted as the first abolitionist text, a paradigm of colonial realism, or a feminist text voicing the vindication of women's rights. Nevertheless, it is yet to show how Behn's racial discrimination renders her novel a proslavery document in the history of English literature. This study would unearth how *Oroonoko* is tainted with colonial ideology cultural superiority, racial discrimination, and justification of the institution of chattel slavery in an ambivalent manner.

Material and Methods

This is a text-based qualitative study. The selected novel serves as the primary data source, for which textual analysis is used as an analytical method. Bhabha's (1994) postcolonial perspective on 'ambivalence' in colonial settings, as a decisive mechanism for the colonized to pinpoint the inherent flaws and contradictions of colonial discourse from within, is what serves as an important theoretical underpinning for the textual rereading of the novel. Viewed from this perspective, Behn's *Oroonoko* expresses colonial ambivalence regarding slavery and that makes the novel a pro-colonial and proslavery work written to project and justify the slavery enterprise on a racial basis. Our study of *Oroonoko* argues that this novel is not an antislavery document as it is tainted with colonial ambivalence, in which Oroonoko acts as a surface on which the narrator projects her own political and religious convictions.

However, the objective of this rereading is not to formulate or provide some corrective explanations to the previous interpretations. Rather, we aim at pointing out the manipulative techniques employed by the novelist to misrepresent and marginalize the enslaved people by assuming her self-supposed and self-justified racial or ethnic superiority over the Blacks. As a whole, it is investigated how Behn's novel is a pro-colonial and proslavery document that ambivalently justifies commercial slavery. Therefore, following Bhabha's (1994) perspective on 'colonial ambivalence', it is upheld that the novel instead of categorically decrying the institution of slavery rather records the novelist's ambivalent attitude to the subject.

Slavery, Racism and Colonial Ambivalence in Behn's *Oroonoko*: A Postcolonial Analysis

Colonial ambivalence that is seen in the novel's opening scene, gets momentum while Behn unfolds slavery-related resistance. The white man while whipping Oroonoko, mercilessly rendered the flesh of his body:

When they thought they were sufficiently Reveng'd on him, they unty'd him, almost Fainting, with loss of Blood, from a thousand Wounds all over his body; from which they had rent his Cloths, and led him Bleeding and Naked as he was; and loaded him all over with Irons, and then rubbed his Wounds. (p.57)

It is evident how the institution of chattel slavery dehumanized and de-culturized the subjugated people and this is what the enslavers supplied to the colonies. Oroonoko's act of valor, while he is being whipped, shows how resolutely he defies the enslavers who enchained him. Moreover, the narrator's silence on the brutal acts of the colonizers emphatically points out her tacit approval of commercial subjugation. Lipking (1997), the African slave workforce was utilized to benefit the colonizers. Therefore, Surinam, the setting of the novel and a short-lived colony of England, at its apogee, in 1665, had a thousand slaves, employed on sugarcane and coffee plantations.

We argue that it was on the basis of racist ideology that the colonizers justified the institution of chattel slavery. Whistler (cited in Lipking, 1997), who got control of Jamaica from Spanish forces, wrote: "This island is inhabited with all sorts: with English, French, Dutch, Scots, Irish, Spaniards they being Jews: with Indians and miserable Negroes born to perpetual slavery, they and their seed" (p. 107) (My Italics). We see Whistler despising the negroes on the basis of racial discrimination. A similar attitude is observable in the novel as Behn does not condemn this barbarous and inhuman act of enslaving other humans. Although she depicts the horrors and cruelties of slavery, she never recommends that this should be outlawed as an institution and this is enough to showcase her colonial ambivalence on the subject of slavery. We know the captain betrayed Oroonoko, but Behn withholds her judgment regarding this betrayal, as she says:

Some have commended this act, as brave, in the captain; *but I will spare my sense of it*, and leave it to my Reader, to judge as he pleases. It may be easily guessed, in what manner the prince resented this Indignity... so he rag'd, so he struggl'd for liberty, but all in vain. (p. 31) (My Italics)

The phrase, "I will spare my sense of it," is an index of Behn's being ambivalent in criticizing the inhuman and hypocritical conduct of the shipmaster who snatched Oroonoko's freedom. Bhabha (1994) has affirmed that the knowledge created by such a discourse is an anxious form of knowledge that sanctions "the possibility of simultaneously embracing two contradictory beliefs, one official and one secret, one archaic and one progressive, one that allows the myth of origins, the other that articulates difference and divisions" (p. 80).

Moreover, Behn ambivalently constructs Africa on discursive racial lines and such discourse can be taken as an instance of what Ferguson (1992) terms 'Anglo-African discourse' that characteristically investigates the colonizers' intense negative attitudes towards Africans as well as slaves. In this respect, the narrator informs us that whenever the Christian enslavers purchased slaves, they renamed them because their original names looked very odd and barbarous to their masters. Following the same custom, Oroonoko and Imoinda were renamed Caesar and Clemene respectively: "I ought to tell you, that the Christians never buy any Slaves but they give 'em some Name of their own, *their native ones being likely very barbarous and hard to pronounce*" (p. 36) (Emphasis added). These lines indicate how ambivalent the novelist is in her treatment of the subject of commercial slavery and slaves whom she constructs on the lines of the Anglo-African discourse. Because, the novelist herself prefers the name, Caesar over Oroonoko in the novel.

Besides, the narrator tells us that along with Oroonoko, an unnamed 'French-Man' was also enslaved, but as he was a white man, the captain ensured him that he would be set free as soon as they came to land (p. 33). According to Ashcroft et al (2007), the development of racism in the post-renaissance era was instrumental in paving the way for chattel slavery: "Race and racial prejudice in their modern forms have thus been immediately bound up with the colonial form of the institution of slavery, to the degree that it seems almost impossible to disentangle them" (p. 196). Notably, the narrator affirms that as the 'French-Man' was a Christian by faith, he could never have been enslaved. So Behn seems to be reinforcing and celebrating her ethnic and religious superiority while documenting the true story of the royal slave, Oroonoko. This is how colonial discourse/ambivalence carries the seeds of its instability from within, as it is based on the stereotype which serves as the principal discursive strategy for the colonizers to establish a form of knowledge and identity for themselves (Iqbal & Rehan, 2020, p. 33).

In the opening scene of the novel, the narrator seems to be sympathetic to the hero of her novel but he didn't trust her for he knew that the European masters/enslavers would never grant him freedom. Therefore, he told his fellow sufferers that under this servitude, they are living the life of beasts and not that of humans (p. 52). The subsequent lines enunciate his remarkable ideas about liberty and are a reflection of emancipatory craves:

My dear Friends and Fellow sufferers, shou'd we be Slaves to an unknown People? *Have they Vanquished us Nobly in Fight? Have they Won us in Honourable Battle? And are we by the chance of War, became their slave?* This wou'd not anger a Noble Heart, this would not animate a Soldiers Soul; no, but we are Bought and Sold like Apes or Monkeys, to be the sport of Woman, Fools and Coward. (p. 52) (My Italics)

We see Oroonoko delineating a detailed account of the importance of dignity and self-realization necessary for an individual to stage conclusive rebelliousness against the humanity oppressing institution of chattel slavery. Also, we see how thoughtfully Oroonoko knows the significance of the violent struggle against the overarching violent treatment borne by slaves in the colonies. Consequently, Oroonoko along with his co-sufferers staged a revolt against the plantation owners

and started a march at night. But when the colonial forces came to know about this revolt, they instantly responded to suppress it and the narrator informs us:

You may imagine this News was not only suddenly spread all over the Plantations, but soon reach'd the Neighbouring ones, and we had by Noon about Six hundred Men, they call the Militia of the Country, that came to assist us in the pursuit of the Fugitives. (p. 54)

These lines reinstate that the novel is a proslavery document which forefronts colonial ambivalence as the integral part of colonial encounters because the narrator does not seem to be either sympathizing or detaching herself from the slaves who challenged their masters to regain their lost freedom. Although the use of personal plural pronouns such as "us" and "we" index her attachments with masters yet her desire to remain loyal to Oroonoko is enough to reinforce her colonial ambivalence. Fogarty (1994) has therefore asserted that Behn's novel failed to condemn the institution of chattel or commercial slavery in emphatic manners. So, she remained ambivalent in her response to this dehumanizing enterprise: "The ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority enables a form of subversion, founded on the undecidability that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 112). Notably, in the struggle for liberty, Oroonoko was deserted by his companions because they surrendered themselves before the commands of their masters. Although Oroonoko was also ensured that if he surrenders, he will be set free yet he refused to yield before his so-called colonial benefactors and declared: "There was *no faith in the white Men, or the Gods they Ador'd; who instructed 'em in Principles so false, that honest Men cou'd not live amongst 'em*" (p.56) (emphasis added).

This is how Oroonoko has challenged the self-justified edifice of European civilization aimed at bringing the distant land into the fold of history. Unlike the novelist's colonial ambivalence, he has provided an equally assertive stance not only against slavery but also against its operators. On account of repeated assurances of dignity and self-esteem, the colonists were able to convince Oroonoko to surrender. Nevertheless, again, he was trapped for after the submission, he was mercilessly tortured by the English enslavers who being satisfied with their revenge on him, left him with thousand wounds on his body, and "to complete their cruelty," they sprinkled "Indian Pepper" on his wounds, but he stood firm and resolute. For, he knew that the armed struggle is a prerequisite for gaining autonomous status. Fanon has maintained that at the individual level, "violence is a cleansing force" because "it frees the native from his inferiority complex and his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect" (p. 74).

Furtherer, before staging a revolt against his oppressors, Oroonoko decided to murder his pregnant wife. Sussman (1997) has maintained that as the newly born children gain their cultural inheritance through a settled genealogical descent so by murdering his Imoinda, Oroonoko wanted to safeguard his offspring from slavery. Here, the novelist compares Oroonoko's anger and disgust to that of the "Monster of the Wood," and this is how she renders his image like a terrifying beast. This again registers Behn's ambivalent attitude toward the hero of her novel for, on the one hand, she claims to be sympathetic with him, and on the other, she depicts him as monstrous

to render the human-animal cutting edge as reasonably indeterminate. Indeed, such ambivalent illustrations from the novel emphatically point to the possible sites of resistance that the colonized can exploit while targeting such an agonizing regime: "The ambivalent identifications of love and hate occupy the same psychic space; and paranoid projections 'outwards' return to haunt and split the place from which they are made" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 149).

From the jungle, Oroonoko was brought to the plantations by the colonial militia, and almost after a week, when he recovered his senses, the narrator once again tried to persuade him with new assurances of freedom. But he rejected their betraying offer and proclaimed:

He assured us if we did not dispatch him, he wou'd prove very fatal to a great many. We said all cou'd make him live, and gave him new assurance; but he begg'd we wou'd not think so poorly of him, or his love to Imoinda, to imagine we could flatter him to life again. (p. 63)

We also see how ambivalently the novelist as a spokesperson of the European colonists, documents the struggle of her hero who continued an untiring struggle for freedom. This is how Oroonoko critiques the conduct of the white enslavers who self-justifying claim to be the benefactors of slaves. The African slave does not even want to live with them because of the lack of moral considerations in their conduct. Chibka (1997) is of the view that Oroonoko's tragedy lies in the fact that he could not timely recognize the true face of the seeming benefactor, Great-Mistress, the novelist who with the use of some digressions in the novel, has been successful in delaying Oroonoko's conclusive rebellion against the colonial masters.

Likewise, the ending scene of the novel characteristically points out the enslavers' brutal and dehumanizing treatment of Oroonoko and the novelist's ambivalence to the same. The enslavers wanted to award Oroonoko such an enduring punishment that may send an alarm to other slaves barring them from challenging their masters' authority. As a result, Oroonoko was lashed and then slaughtered, but he stood indifferent to the corporal punishment and continued smoking his pipe to demonstrate his steadfast defiance against oppression. But the narrator instead of condemning this act of immense brutality again stands ambivalent and withholds her judgment on the matter. She informs the readers:

The Executioner came, and first cut off his Member, and threw them into the fire, after that, with an ill-favored Knife, he cut his Ears, and his Nose and burn'd them; he still Smocked on, as if nothing had touched him; then they hack'd 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. (p. 64)

This deformed and terrifying depiction of the cigarette-smoking Oroonoko eventually negates the presence of any sympathetic bond between the novelist and the royal slave. The novelist's silence on such atrocity and at the same showing sympathy with her hero's tragic fate is an effective illustration of how colonial ambivalence makes her uncertain and indecisive regarding expressing uncompromising disapproval of the dehumanizing institution of commercial slavery.

Bhabha (1994) has rightly proclaimed that “it is crucial to remember that the colonial construction of the cultural (the site of the civilizing mission) through the process of disavowal is authoritative to the extent to which it is structured around the ambivalence of splitting, denial, repetition – strategies of defence that mobilize culture as an open-textured” (p. 114). This is how On Oroonoko’s body, Behn’s colonial ambivalence, and proslavery ideology were reproduced and rewritten. The novel has also been instrumental in pinpointing how the colonizers have been making a laborious effort to eliminate the disturbance-causing beast-like creatures from their colonies Fanon (1967) asserts that “the well-being and the progress of Europe have been built up with the sweat and the dead bodies of Negroes, Arabs, Indians, and Yellow races. We have decided not to overlook this any longer” (p.76).

Conclusion

To conclude, it has been found that Behn’s *Oroonoko* does carry the marks of colonial ambivalence regarding its treatment of slavery and it is, therefore, a proslavery narrative constructed on racial lines. Behn seems to be in favor of running the commercial and chattel institution of slavery, and instead of admitting the fact that it was an oppressive and exploitative enterprise, she rather ambivalently reinforces the proslavery discourse that categorizes the colonized/slaves as primitives as well as barbarians. Oroonoko resisted the colonial atrocities; he was corrected by an exemplary death sentence as it was necessary to eliminate him from the colonial plantation and it also signaled a warning for other slaves to refrain from interfering in the smooth functioning of the colonial institution of slavery. Throughout the novel, we see the novelist ambivalently treating this institution of slavery, and it seems that the slave trade is not bad practice as long as the dealers are white gentlemen who humanely and philanthropically struggle to convert the pagan Africans to the light of Christianity. With the use of third-person omniscient narration, Behn has successfully subsumed the voices of the natives and her African Royal slave, and this is what makes it a pro-colonial and proslavery document in the history of English literature.

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