

AN ANALYSIS: *OROONOKO, THE ROYAL SLAVE*

By

Rashondria Daniel, M.A
Lamar University,
Texas, USA

Abstract:

Oroonoko is a very important text that challenges the institution of slavery, while simultaneously explores the depths of racism. As an early text in 1688, the novella highlights the struggles of colonialism that led up to an ultimate act of rebellion. Although Aphra Behn does not take a clear stance concerning slavery, she romanticizes the idea of it. Doing so, causes confusion among readers. In this paper I argue that while Aphra Behn does not take a bold stance against slavery, she is infatuated with Oroonoko. Her love for him can be seen through his wife, Imoinda. I further argue that Behn's love for Oroonoko dies with his wife. There is great symbolism and parallelism between Behn's feelings about Oroonoko and how she treats his character through her descriptive writing.

Key Words: Aphra Behn, Slavery, Racism, Colonialism, Honor

An Analysis: *Oroonoko, The Royal Slave*

Oroonoko is a heart-wrenching story written by Aphra Behn in 1688, and it is considered to be one of the earliest English novels. The genre of the early novel is called "Romans Africans." The story is about a "royal slave," noting how he was tricked into slavery. While Behn is unclear in her position about slavery, she takes time to explain and, in some ways, express sympathy for Oroonoko's situation in the text. However, no matter how sympathetic she may make the reader feel at times, she treats Oroonoko like a puppet and does not release her control of the character. "We do not see Behn anywhere in the novel condemning the barbarous and inhumane act of the colonists. Though she talks about the horror of this institution in her novel, yet she never recommended that this should be outlawed as an institute (Ahmad 2586). In the novel, Behn refers to Oroonoko as "The Royal Slave." She uses this reference because he was royal and tricked into slavery. For this reason, Oroonoko was stripped of his name—his cultural name and given the name Caesar. Some might argue that this Oroonoko's new name references Julius Caesar—calling it an allusion. In my opinion, Behn is mocking Oroonoko because of his royal position and her disdain of him being black and royal. *Oroonoko* is a very complex text that takes readers on an emotional journey—forever hoping for the attainment of freedom for Oroonoko, who many readers call a hero.

While *Oroonoko* was challenging to read due to the nature of the text and the explicit details revealed to the reader about the treatment of Oroonoko and other slaves, it was simultaneously an interesting novel. The story is quite complex, having many different facets that are not all revealed by the writer. Aphra Behn leaves much for the reader to decide. Although many issues in the text are not fully resolved, and we do not know her position on many things, the text is designed to make the readers infer and form strong opinions about her views and opinions about slavery and about race. For example, throughout the story, Oroonoko tries to obtain freedom, but he is unsuccessful each time. I deduce that if Aphra Behn was against slavery, she would have let him prevail at some point in the text. *In Revisiting Aphra Behn's Treatment of Slavery: A Postcolonial Study*, the author Munawar Ahmad argues that "Aphra Behn has employed multifarious digressions to avert Oroonoko's intent from his original objective: liberty, because she wanted to keep him in the eternal servitude of European planters" (2587).

Furthermore, Oroonoko was lied to and given false hope. Ultimately, the only way he escaped captivity was through death. In addition, Oroonoko tried to get other slaves to realize how inhumane slavery was. He wanted them to join him in a rebellion. However, they were afraid of severe punishment and retaliation. I argue that because of Oroonoko's noble status, he was not afraid to take risks. As a prince, he understood honor and integrity. He was willing to obtain freedom at any cost. Unfortunately, everyone did not share his sentiments. There are a lot of different elements at work in the novel, and in many ways, this novel shows the mental turmoil slaves were in as each day proved to be a challenge in the fight to obtaining freedom. With this in mind, *Oroonoko* is a story of love, betrayal, and nobility. While there are many themes included in the novel, these are just some of the most prevalent ones.

Other themes in *Oroonoko* include: racism, slavery, colonialism, freedom, and honor. Throughout history, Europeans or white people have colonized land and made themselves at the helm of the racial and social hierarchy. They made others feel inferior in order for them to feel superior. The same is true in the case of Oroonoko. In the text, there are some characters that tried to befriend Oroonoko, but when it was all said and done, Oroonoko was nothing but a slave to them—property that they tortured terribly. Because the colonizers thought themselves superior, they made Oroonoko and other slaves do hard labor. During those times, many white people believed that Africans could handle physically taxing tasks. The tasks they were forced to complete were demeaning and inhumane to say the least. When dealing with and discussing the issue of racism, skin color is most certainly the topic of discussion. Historically, white people have had an issue with black skin. Ironically, in *Oroonoko*, Aphra Behn describes Oroonoko's skin as "perfect ebony." This is a very specific description. She did not say "black," but she made a point to emphasize "ebony," and she also made a point to mention "perfect." "His face was not of that brown, rusty black which most of his nation are, but a perfect ebony or polished jet," (*Broadview Anthology*, 206). Perhaps, this is why she does not allow Oroonoko to obtain freedom. Because of how they viewed blacks, she could not fathom how someone so beautiful could be part of the race they so openly despise. Oroonoko was not just a slave, he was royal and had perfect skin according to Behn. It seems as if Oroonoko was the anomaly, and that made it too much for Behn to comprehend. She proves this as she creates, in my opinion, an internal battle within herself about Oroonoko's features as analyzes him to a fault.

However, just as Behn compliments his African, cultural features, she lauds specific aspects of what she calls "Roman features." For example, when she finishes discussing how exceptional and distinct he is from other blacks, she writes "His nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat. His mouth, the finest that could be seen, far from those great turned lips, which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes," (*Broadview Anthology*, pg. 206). Although Oroonoko was considered "upper echelon" due to his position in society, he is now "upper echelon" as a slave because she finds him superior among other slaves. I argue that this could also be the reason Oroonoko could not get the other slaves to join his revolt. Behn's treatment of him in the novel leaves room for resentment among slaves. Historically, it has been frowned upon to be favored by the master. It makes the slave in question appear to be a traitor that cannot be trusted.

When discussing themes, it is important to discuss honor. Honor is a very important element in this early novel because of Oroonoko's position prior to being tricked into slavery. Because Oroonoko was a prince, he understood honor. In all that he did, he did it with integrity and honor. As a person of his stature, it is important that honor was the driving force of who he was. His strong code of honor made him approach problems and life differently. Even when he was forced to make tough decisions, he stood by what he said. Many times, he spoke out against

the treatment himself, along with other enslaved servants. Oroonoko referred to slavery as “unwanted misery,” (Ahmad). I argue that Oroonoko’s last act of heroic honor was protecting his wife and unborn child from the hands of the Europeans. Oroonoko knew his life was going to end soon, and he did not want his wife subjected to the heinous activity of their oppressors. So, he made the decision to take her life and the life of their unborn child. His wife, Imoinda knew how strongly he felt about this, so she agreed to his plan.

Unfortunately, history shows this to be true. Many Africans chose the sea on their way to the “New World” because they felt that death was better than bondage. It is so sad that so many had to make that decision. Africans are a very proud group of people. They are proud of their culture and are proud of their heritage. The pride that they possess is instilled in them and passed down through the generations. Many wanted to escape from the trap of the Europeans and perform their last act of freedom. The same pride lived in Oroonoko.

According to the *Broadview Anthology*, it is not determined whether Oroonoko the character was fictitious or inspired by a real person. However, I would argue that the novel could be considered historical fiction. Although Oroonoko may not be a real person, there are many stories that are similar to the one told by Aphra Behn that are true, including the ones we do not yet know of. On the other hand, Janet Todd, in her article called: *Oroonoko: Historical and Political Contexts* has a different idea.

Writing, especially writing in those times were indicative of situations and scandals. In her article, Janet believes that Aphra Behn wrote *Oroonoko* right after the announcement of the pregnancy that ensured a Catholic succession. Once *Oroonoko* was released, it was not hard for readers to associate Oroonoko’s family in the novel to the royal family in question. So, although *Oroonoko* is fiction, Behn’s experiences and interactions definitely played a huge part in the story (Todd).

While I acknowledge Janet’s argument, and I do believe the *Oroonoko* was birthed from a scandal, I strongly believe that Aphra Behn is in love with a slave. Of course, in those times a white woman falling in love with a black man, not to mention a slave was unheard of. I argue that she tries to rectify her forbidden love by creating Oroonoko. However, she tries to hide it with her ambiguity about slavery by covering it up with Imoinda, who eventually becomes Oroonoko’s wife. Through Imoinda, Aphra Behn is able to channel her love “the gallant slave,” (*Broadview Anthology*, 203) without it being obvious. After all, no one white will question the love of two slaves or be bothered with understanding the complexity of their relationship. However, I deduce that when Imoinda dies, so did Behn’s love interest. I believe the death of Imoinda symbolizes a love that could never be between Behn and the slave she loves.

Oroonoko, was a prince, and he is of noble blood according to the text in the anthology. Perhaps that is why Behn treated his character with such care. Maybe the writer thought that a noble prince being enslaved, even tricked as he was, was absolutely ridiculous. It really makes the reader wonder not only about her favoritism or bias towards him but also her position on slavery. It is evident that she did not have the same compassion or care for the other slaves.

In Janet Todd’s article, she highlights the fact that Aphra Behn, like most of her fellow writers, accepted slavery for the most part. “Despite a few dissenting voices at the time of *Oroonoko*’s publication, on the whole popular opinion was not yet against slavery,” (*Broadview Anthology*, pg. 202). Furthermore, Janet maintains that enslaving someone born noble appalled Behn. She also believes that Behn lacks the modern understanding of slavery (Todd). “Someone” means any person, no matter the color. I have a hard time believing that Aphra Behn, in those times

looked beyond color. It had to be more than just that for her to take interest in Oroonoko. I also believe that she did in fact have a modern idea of slavery.

According to the introduction about Oroonoko on pg. 202, it states that Behn might have been married to a slave trader. As a matter of fact, Behn goes into great detail about the slave trade on pg. 204, in the *Broadview Anthology*. She discusses the whole process, even down to how to purchase slaves. In the paragraph above her discussing the slave trade, she says “Those then we make use of to work in our plantations of sugar are negroes...” (*Broadview Anthology: Oroonoko*).

While reading this novel, I noticed that Behn contradicts herself quite a bit. On one hand, she is so distraught about Oroonoko being a slave, then she uses first person pronouns that makes the reader believe that she is pro-slavery. In an article I read by Ruth Nestvold, she also identifies such contradictions. In her article, she argues that “a number of contradictions in Oroonoko are connected to the elements that make it a transitional work in the development of the novel: the combination of the courtly world of a romance (personified ironically in a black slave), and the new world of contemporary reader—and the narrator.”(Nestvold, pg. 1). What is also contradictory is the fact that the narrator, who is presumably Aphra Behn and the protagonist who is black, noble, and was tricked into slavery (Nestvold).

Not too long after the story begins, Behn begins to describe Oroonoko. She talks about him in the utmost respect. While describing Oroonoko, she comments on his intelligence. She states “He knew almost as much as if he read much...” (*Broadview Anthology*, pg. 205-206). It is almost as if she is surprised by his knowledge. He was a prince, so of course his knowledge about various topics is broad because of his position. Perhaps this added to her fascination of him.

Another aspect that is fascinating when discussing Behn’s attitude and treatment of Oroonoko throughout the text is the way that she described his skin. She went on for at least a paragraph about his skin. “His face was not that of brown, rusty black which most of that nation are, but a perfect ebony, or polished jet,” (*Broadview Anthology*, pg. 206). I know that Behn clearly has some admiration for Oroonoko, maybe even some respect; however, how can she talk about his skin is perfect, but she does not share the same sentiment for the others. This is another point that makes the reader believe she is pro-slavery. Although Oroonoko was a prince, he is a slave now from being tricked into it. This still raises the question about her attachment to him. Even with her attachment, Behn seems surprised by how handsome he is.

Behn simultaneously describes Oroonoko’s “white” features. “His eyes were the most awful that could be seen, and very piercing, like the white of them being like snow, as were his teeth. 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. The whole proportion and air of his face was so noble and exactly formed, that, bating his colour, there could be nothing in nature more beautiful, agreeable and handsome,” (*Broadview Anthology*, pg. 206).

In describing Oroonoko in the way she did, I argue that Behn has the “how can someone so perfect be black” idea. I believe part of her interest in him is because he does not look like the others, which causes her to rationalize her feelings towards him. She makes him superior in his status and in his physical appearance, especially the physical traits that she finds “Roman.” By doing this, she discredits or reduces his strong African qualities.

Later in the novel, Oroonoko's name is changed to Caesar. From researching, reading, and studying literature as well as history, I know that changing a slave's name was common. There are many reasons why a slave's name is changed which include the following: to "Americanize" or colonize them. Some slave owners may have thought that African names were too hard to pronounce, or just simply because they could (Johnson). Looking back on the series "Roots," Alex Haley shows us this through the treatment of Kunte Kinte, who, like Oroonoko is strong and gallant but is forced to answer to a new name—Toby. Slave owners forcing slaves to change their names is a power move, and it is also a form of control. The slaves were forced to deny their own identity that is full of rich African culture to assimilate an American name that does mean anything to them or hold any cultural esteem.

The way Behn handles his name change is interesting. "The choice to call him Caesar reflects his amphibious nature as a royal slave, and it perhaps prefigures his grotesque cutting/cesarean at the end, a plot development that, I will argue, reflects a complicated politics of passivity," (Harol, pg. 453). So, while Oroonoko was forced to abandon his cultural name, Behn gave him a name that was equal to his position in society. This act also proves her infatuation with Oroonoko as every chance she gets, she places him on a pedestal.

Oroonoko being named after Caesar was hinting to readers about what was to come. Oroonoko can also be compared to Caesar due to nobility and social status. Aphra Behn used the name change to set her audience up for Oroonoko's tragic demise, just like Caesar (Johnson). In saying that, the reader must wonder that Behn, in doing so, creates another contradiction in her treatment of Oroonoko. Maybe she did not value him at all. She spoke so highly of him, all to have him dismembered and mutilated.

In the text, Behn refers to Oroonoko as a hero. Again, she is putting him on a pedestal and describing him with the utmost respect. Perhaps she regards him as hero due his "white" features. Maybe he was considered a hero because of his social status and how other slaves looked up to him. That premise failed in my opinion, when the other slaves backed out of the revolt. People will follow a true leader. Think about the Underground Railroad. Harriet Tubman lead many people to freedom. Sure, they were afraid, but they kept going. In Oroonoko's case, that did not happen. At some point in the novel, Oroonoko decided that in Janet Todd's words "some people are too servile or ignoble for freedom," (Todd).

In my opinion, Behn's attitude and treatment towards Oroonoko changes throughout the text. Her account is somewhat unreliable. Perhaps she is too close to the problem in the story. As a result, the reader gets mixed signals from her and how she feels about him. For example, I know that she is the author, but she is also the narrator. Anytime the narrator is too close to the story, there is skewed ideas. This is because the author does not have a bird's eye view and may be looking at the issue from only one point of view. Her response about him does not seem genuine because in my opinion, her political views about slavery and how she feels about Oroonoko clash. While it is abundantly clear that she is fond of him, but given the time, she has to be careful. "Nevertheless, she failed to keep her neutrality; as in reality, she is involved in the process of exterminating the "self" or African Prince into a disfigured body..." (Ahmad pg. 2586).

To further prove my point, on page 232, in the anthology, Behn as the writer discusses how Oroonoko and Tuscan were whipped in an inhumane manner, rendering the flesh from their skin. If she held Oroonoko in such high esteem, why did she allow for him to be beaten in the story? She even goes on to say how they rubbed his wounds with Indian pepper. She does respect him, so I do not understand her treatment of him here. To add, further down she says

that she was overtaken by the news that Oroonoko was treated like a common slave. On the next page, she states that they all admired how he lived in so much tormenting pain (*Broadview Anthology*, pg. 232-233).

Behn's love for Oroonoko is definitely hidden in the beautiful Imoinda. According to an essay, "Susan Z. Andrade invents an inexpressible, implied, and unspeakable romance between the narrator and Oroonoko. A romance that, by her own definition, is not mentioned in the text. She believes, however, that it represented through Oroonoko's copulation with Imoinda, who prevents the white woman from committing miscegenation," (Hughes, pg. 8).

After reflecting on what I know about slavery, history, and even Oroonoko's reasons for killing Imoinda, it was not uncommon for slave masters to be in love with their slaves or force them to have their children. So, the same could definitely be said for Behn as the narrator. Other than Oroonoko, Imoinda is the only other slave that she thinks is beautiful. It could be that Behn has some resentment towards Imoinda and towards Oroonoko for not feeling the same. Perhaps this also contributes to the many contradictions in the text.

Finally, in discussing her attitude and treatment towards Oroonoko, the way she described his death was very graphic. If a person has respect or admiration for another person, then he or she would do their best to preserve the other person's image. The way Oroonoko died in my opinion, was not heroic, nor did it seem someone of his caliber would perish in such a way. He was royal. I'm sure he had the best weapons and superior fighting skills. It does not seem as if he would succumb to such a fate.

Oroonoko was dismembered, and parts of his body were thrown into the fire. After, they cut off his ears and nose, they burned them. They cut him off bit by bit until he died. In this part, I deduce that the narrator was remorseful about what happened, but she still stood around, watched, and did nothing. Furthermore, although the narrator respected, admired, and maybe even loved Oroonoko, she would only go so far because after all the best parts of him were "white," and he, after all, was still a black man, no longer a King but a slave. Oroonoko's death symbolizes the ultimate promise of freedom that slaves could not obtain while in captivity. The yearn for freedom causes people to do the unthinkable. In the end, Oroonoko led a one man revolt, taking matters into his own hands to end his bout with slavery having maintained his reputation of being a hero.

Bibliography

- Ahmad, Munawar. "Revisiting Aphra Behn's Treatment of Slavery: A Postcolonial Study." *Department of English, International Islamic University Islamabad*, 2014, pp. 2585–89, www.sci-int.com/pdf/2238570201%20a--2585-2589--Munawar%20Iqbal%20Ahmad-SS--FINAL--CO%20-IRFAN.pdf. Accessed. 3/15/2022
- Behn, Aphra. "Aphra Behn's Oroonoko, 1688." *All Discussing Literature: Restoration & 18th Century Collection Items*, 1688, www.bl.uk/collection-items/aphra-behns-oroonoko-1688. Accessed. 3/14/2022.
- Black, Joseph, et al. "The Broadview Anthology of British Literature: Volume 3: The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century - Second Edition (Broadview Anthology of British Literature - Second Edition)." *Oroonoko: Or, The Royal Slave, A True History*, Aphra, Behn, 2nd ed., Broadview Press, 2012, pp. 196–237.
- Harol, Corrinne. "The Passion of Oroonoko: Passive Obedience, The Royal Slave, and Aphra Behn's Baroque Realism." *ELH: English Literary History*, vol. 79, no. 2, 2012, pp. 447–75. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi-org.libproxy.lamar.edu/10.1353/elh.2012.0014>.
- Hughes, Derek. "Race, Gender, and Scholarly Practice: Aphra Behn's Oroonoko." *Essays in Criticism: A Quarterly Journal of Literary Criticism*, vol. 52, no. 1, Jan. 2002, pp. 1–22. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi-org.libproxy.lamar.edu/10.1093/eic/52.1.1>.
- Nestvold, Ruth. "The White Mistress and the Black Slave." *The Aphra Behn Page*, 1995, pp. 1–3, www.lit-arts.net/Behn/racism.htm. Accessed 3/19/2022
- Todd, Janet. "Oroonoko: Historical and Political Contexts." *Discovering Literature: Restoration & 18th Century*, 2018, www.bl.uk/restoration-18th-century-literature/articles/oroonoko-historical-and-political-contexts. Accessed. 3/17/2022
- Sarajohnson97. "The Tragic Lives of Oroonoko and Julius Caesar." *British Literature 1700–1900, A Course Blog*, 8 Mar. 2017, britlitsurvey2.wordpress.com/2017/03/07/the-tragic-lives-of-oroonoko-and-julius-caesar/#:%7E:text=Oroonoko%20going%20by%20Caesar%20can,face%2C%20just%20like%20Julius%20Caesar. Accessed. 3/15/2022