



Noble resistance and colonial violence: A critical study of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*

Dr. P. Starlin Judith Venibha

Assistant Professor in English

Muslim Arts College, Thiruvithancode

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti

Tirunelveli – 627012, Tamil Nadu, India

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Abstract

Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* occupies a unique space in English literary history as one of the earliest prose narratives that anticipates the modern novel while simultaneously exploring issues of race, colonialism, slavery, heroism, and narrative authority. This dissertation examines the ideological complexity of Behn's text, focusing on the representation of *Oroonoko* as a noble African prince, the contradictions of European colonial discourse, and Behn's ambiguous moral stance toward slavery. Through close reading of key passages, the dissertation analyses how Behn constructs heroism through classical and aristocratic virtues while simultaneously participating in exoticism and racial idealisation. The work also considers the narrative techniques that Behn employs, particularly the eyewitness persona, descriptive realism, and sentimental rhetoric. Further, the dissertation contextualises *Oroonoko* within the political climate of Restoration England, the rise of colonial capitalism, and the emergence of women writers. The study concludes that *Oroonoko* is a foundational yet paradoxical work: it critiques aspects of slavery and colonial brutality even as it remains complicit in imperial ideology. Ultimately, Behn's narrative is a powerful early exploration of the human cost of slavery, the instability of authority, and the tragic collision between European modernity and non-European sovereignty.

Keywords: Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko*, slavery, colonialism, race, Restoration literature, heroism

Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* or, The Royal Slave stands as one of the earliest extended prose works in English literary tradition. Published in 1688, it blends romance, travel

narrative, biography, and political commentary. Behn, one of the first English women to earn a living by writing, uses the tale to explore authority, race, and the violent foundations of

colonial expansion. Behn writes, "I do not pretend, in giving you the history of this royal slave, to entertain my reader with adventures of a feigned hero (23)" asserting the truth-value of her narrative. This claim to eyewitness authenticity sets *Oroonoko* apart from earlier prose romances. This dissertation explores the thematic, political, and narrative dimensions of *Oroonoko*, arguing that the text is both progressive and complicit: it criticises European brutality while simultaneously subscribing to racialised notions of nobility and beauty.

Oroonoko is described as a strong warrior who stands out from the other slaves and deserves his freedom. Behn focuses on the virtue and strength of Oroonoko as a warrior, painting him as a hero. Although the man who bought Oroonoko was enamoured by him and wished for his freedom, he did nothing to grant it, furthering his role in the institution of slavery. Although Oroonoko is painted as a heroic figure, his focus on honour leads to his downfall. He continues to trust untrustworthy figures rather than thinking logically. The love of his family strengthens Oroonoko and is the reason why he leads a slave revolt. However, the revolt ended in many slaves being punished, the 'honourable' murder of Imoinda, and his own torturous death. Although this novel is known for its attempt to get a European audience to sympathize with slaves, Behn promotes good character in men to be treated honourably. Oroonoko stood out because he had honourable traits, which led to him being liked by his white slaveholders. Though Oroonoko helped sympathize the characters, Behn's focus on Oroonoko's honourable traits enforces a limited view of slavery.

Restoration England was marked by political upheaval, global expansion, and intense colonial competition. Behn's narrative reflects England's growing involvement in the Atlantic slave trade and the colonisation of Surinam. The narrator comments on the supposedly 'civil and just' treatment of Indigenous people by the English, contrasting

them with the 'cruel' other European colonial powers. Yet, her own narrative exposes English duplicity.

Oroonoko's enslavement following the deceit of the English captain symbolises the systemic violence of colonial enterprise. Behn's text demonstrates the fatal intersection of African nobility with European capitalism: the prince's honour-based worldview cannot survive in a world governed by profit and coercion. Behn's depiction of *Oroonoko* draws heavily on classical and aristocratic ideals. He is portrayed as physically extraordinary, morally upright, courageous, and rational traits associated in the 17th century with European nobility. Behn writes that he possessed a "shape so noble... that he seemed something more than mortal' and that his face was 'not of that brown rusty black which most of that nation (125)" revealing both admiration and racial bias.

Oroonoko's heroism is tied to his unwavering sense of honour, which becomes his tragic flaw. His commitment to truth and loyalty contrasts sharply with the deceit and greed of colonial authorities. Behn's sentimentalisation of his suffering helped shape later abolitionist narratives. Imoinda, though less developed than Oroonoko, represents beauty, loyalty, and feminine constancy. Behn describes her as having "the most exquisite shape and the softest look and air that ever grace the face of beauty (78)". Her abduction into the king's otan echoes the vulnerabilities faced by women in patriarchal societies.

In Surinam, Imoinda becomes Oroonoko's emotional anchor. Their relationship reinforces Behn's interest in idealised romantic love, yet Imoinda's voice remains limited. Her death, killed by Oroonoko in a ritual act highlights the tragic consequences of honour culture and colonial entrapment. Behn's narrative oscillates between critique and endorsement of colonial ideology. While she frequently condemns the 'barbarity' and 'treachery' of English colonists, she also

exoticises African and Indigenous peoples. The English traders who deceive and enslave *Oroonoko* illustrate the predatory nature of the slave system. The narrator admits, "He was betrayed by the very men who had professed their love and honour (103)."

The plantation economy of Surinam is depicted as unstable and violent. As *Oroonoko* leads a slave revolt, he exposes the inherent brutality of a system maintained through fear and coercion. One of the most remarkable aspects of *Oroonoko* is Behn's use of a first-person, self-inserting narrator. She claims to have witnessed the events first hand and to have known Oroonoko personally. This technique lends immediacy, yet it also raises questions about reliability. Scholars have long noted the tension between Behn's stated admiration for *Oroonoko* and her complicity in colonial hierarchy. Her narrative reflects the prejudices of her era even when attempting sympathy. This duality makes *Oroonoko* a rich text for postcolonial critique.

The colonists certainly appear evil towards Oroonoko and others. The whites who whip Oroonoko act very cruelly in rending the flesh from his bones:

when they thought they were sufficiently revenged on him, they untied him almost fainting with the loss of blood, from a thousand wounds all over his body...and led him bleeding and naked as he was, and loaded him all over with irons and then rubbed his wounds, to complete their cruelty, with Indian pepper which had like to have made him raving mad. (67)

These descriptions would have horrified seventeenth-century Europeans. Even so, Behn fails to criticize colonialism's use of slaves altogether. Behn does not signal discomfort that slaves cannot retain their own names and are forced to leave their families and friends forever. Thus, though she writes of the horrors of slavery, she never suggests that it

should be outlawed as an institution. Although Oroonoko suffers as a slave, he never regrets taking slaves himself. He merely justifies the practice of slavery in Africa as the fate of men honourably taken in war. Oroonoko never seems troubled by the idea that the slaves he took honourably in war were then sold by him to the British for his own profit. Although he suffers the brutalizing whip before his ultimate death, the hero never shows regret over having been complicit in selling his own countrymen to the British.

The climax of the narrative is brutal and theatrical. Oroonoko, unable to secure freedom for his family, chooses noble death over submission. After killing Imoinda to save her from colonial violation, he faces torture with stoic calm. Behn records that he 'suffered without trembling', positioning him as a martyr figure. His dismemberment at the hands of colonial authorities exposes their moral bankruptcy. The tragic ending reinforces Behn's message: slavery's cruelty corrupts all who participate in it. Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* is a foundational text in English literature, blending early novelistic techniques with sharp colonial critique.

Behn displays Oroonoko as a truly noble and honourable leader. This hero can hardly be compared with the rapacious British colonists and the monstrous mercantile slave traders who barter in human lives. In *Oroonoko*, then, Behn on the one hand seems to be a royalist who completely supports the ideal of a strong, stable monarchy, while on the other hand she attempts to educate her readers about the realities of the slave system, the barbarism of those involved in the trade, and the need for a more noble system, a heroic absolute monarch who will withstand the British urge toward violence and chaos. While Behn's racial attitudes reflect 17th-century assumptions, her portrayal of the horrors of slavery is unusually empathetic for the period. The narrative exposes the contradictions of European civilisation, the fragility of honour in a capitalist world, and the

human devastation wrought by empire. Behn's complex perspective part critique, part participation makes *Oroonoko* an essential site for studying colonial discourse, early novel form, and the emergence of women's literary voices.

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