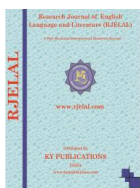




DICHOTOMY OF CHARACTER: OROONOKO – THE ROYAL AND CAESAR – THE SLAVE IN APHRA BEHN'S *OROONOKO*

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Abstract

Oroonoko is hailed as the first literary Abolitionist text, where for the very first time appears a black character as the central figure of a narrative. Aphra Behn, in this sense, can be called a revolutionary writer ahead of her times for having stepped out of the coloniser's narcissistic tendencies. However, certain key obscurities seem to create an ambiguity of intent, for it appears that the narrative itself doesn't object to the institution of slavery as much as it objects to the way it is organised. In that, no matter how heroic the tale may seem, at the end of the day a fully critical treatment of slavery is not present, at the hands of which the protagonist suffers. With the narrator's inconsistent portrayal of the central character emerges the duality of his nature – a certain bifurcation that seems to leave more loose ends than provide a resolution. The paper thus attempts to investigate this dualism which fails to provide a complete realisation of the protagonist's potential as a true hero fighting against the establishment of slavery.

Keywords: abolitionist text, ambivalence, character study, character development, postcolonial reading, slave narrative, racial politics, dehumanisation, identity politics, American literature, duality of character

Introduction

Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, published in 1688, has to its name linked many firsts on account of being a novella with an African man at the centre and not at the hems. It is, however, a matter of much debate whether *Oroonoko* should be considered the earliest American novel or not. William C. Spengemann begins his essay thus

Why is *Oroonoko* never included in studies of "The American Novel" or in courses on "Early American Literature"? As a literary work written in English about America by someone who claims to have lived there, it would seem to deserve a place in the canon... (Spengemann 384)

While much remains for reflection in Spengemann's argument, the novel does seem to hold a steadier position as an Abolitionist text. However, as plausible as that claim may seem towards the beginning of the text, by the end of the narrative, postcolonial scholars do tend to posit a doubt on the authenticity of even that claim. And this is where my argument must begin.

Oroonoko's European affinities

Indeed, *Oroonoko* happens to be the first literary narrative written in English by a European woman with the black man as an emphatic protagonist, and it does offer a criticism of the slavery practices of the English at the time (and not so much of the very idea of slavery itself); but we must not overlook the fact that *Oroonoko* as a

central character serves as a heroic ideal in the most European way possible in an English narrative. We are introduced to Oroonoko, a Coramantine Prince, whose brave and honourable character is worthy of European recognition. Or has he, in fact, been sketched so in order to appease a western audience, by making him as identifiable to European nobility as possible? You need not turn a few pages to be told by a very enthusiastic narrator that Oroonoko's face

was not of that brown, rusty Black which most of that Nation are, but a perfect Ebony, or polish'd Jett. His Eyes were the most awful that cou'd be seen, and very piercing... His Nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat. His Mouth, the finest shap'd that cou'd be seen; far from those great turn'd Lips, which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes. The whole Proportion and Air of his Face was so noble, and exactly form'd, that bating his Colour, there cou'd be nothing in Nature more beautiful, agreeable and handsome. (12)

So, from early on in the novel, it is made clear by the author that for a European audience to hold Oroonoko in any regard, it is essential that he must dissociate himself from his African characteristics so as to be painted in European hues and virtues, albeit the colour of his skin. Oroonoko's affinity to members of the European gentry (or shall I say royalty?) does not seem to contain itself to mere physical appearance but also permeates into his carriage, wit and manners, so that one may find him equivalent to "any Prince civiliz'd in the most refin'd Schools of Humanity and Learning, Or the most Illustrious Courts". (14) In fact, Laura Brown observes

Oroonoko seems at first to be a rather recalcitrant model for "radical contemporaneity": the novella lends itself with greater readiness to the argument from alterity. Indeed, Behn's opening description of Oroonoko, the "royal slave", is a locus classicus of the trope of sentimental identification by which the native "other" is naturalized as a European aristocrat. In physical appearance, the

narrator can barely distinguish her native prince from those of England... If this account of Oroonoko's beauty makes it possible to forget his race, the narrator's description of his character and accomplishments further elaborates the act of absolute identity through which he is initially represented... Oroonoko is not only a natural European and aristocrat, but a natural neoclassicist and Royalist as well, an absurdity generated by the desire for an intimate identification with the "royal slave". (Brown 35)

Taking this argument a little further, I would like to add that all this sophistication of wit, taste and manners ascribed to Oroonoko does not inherently come from his own nature, but as told by the narrator, are a result of the instructions and teachings of the Frenchman, who raises him in the sublime robes of a white gentleman, and to whom Behn doesn't fail to accredit Oroonoko's refined sensibilities in instances more than one.

Once Oroonoko's European affinities and allegiances have been confirmed at the start of the narrative, the plot moves forth to the heroic tale of romance, where once again Oroonoko in his gallant and chivalrous conduct to Imoinda strives for the higher ideal – "his Flames aim'd at Nothing but Honour". (15) Time and again Oroonoko's honour is mentioned in the love plot of the narrative, but the love plot is not what I am chiefly concerned with here.

The dichotomy of character

My contention lies at one of the most crucial points of the narrative when the trajectory of the romantic trials of the unhappy lovers reaches a tragic note, with Imoinda being sold off to slavery and Oroonoko deceived into it. The crux of my argument begins at the instance of Oroonoko's arrival in Surinam, which as a device has been effectively employed in the middle of the narrative. This is a turning point in the novella, and this is also when the narrator steps in as an active participant.

As soon as Oroonoko, the Prince, becomes Oroonoko, the slave, the process of de-idolisation

begins. And the very first move towards this objective is the most significant and striking one – namely the renaming of Oroonoko as Caesar. Oroonoko, who was till this part of the text a royal Prince, is stripped bare of his identity and denied his individuality. The renaming of the slaves is an act of depersonalisation and this incident is no different. This act seems to work in favour of the grand scheme of things that sits in the mind of a coloniser – the grand scheme of reducing nobility to slavery when it comes to the ‘other’. This not only leads to the deindividuation of the ruled but it also is a dehumanising act, in that the noble prince is now a royal savage, where the association of ‘savage’ basically implies less than human, and hence allows a denial of humanity.

This also marks the segregation of the two personas of the central figure. Oroonoko, the Prince, and Caesar, the slave, appear in contrast to each other. Caesar is nothing more than a sport, that too predominantly for women. This might remind you of a captive lion in a circus – the king of the wilderness becomes a tamed entertainer of the civilised men attending the circus. Caesar is no different. An amicable man, inoffensive and loyal, especially to the narrator, whom he addresses as his “Great Mistress”. (41) The man who won battles unconquerable and performed feats impossible now prefers the company of women, the narrator informs us, for he could not hold his drink.

One tends to wonder what went wrong here? And one can come up with no answer but that Oroonoko has a certain duality in his personality, and that there is indeed a dichotomy of character in him as the central figure. On one hand we have Oroonoko, the valorous, noble Prince, and on the other we have Caesar, the pleasant, entertaining Slave.

Reclaiming the self

Interestingly, if we map the geographical dislocation of the characters in the narrative, we realise that both the English ruler and the African slave have been displaced from their home ground to meet at the land of the Native Americans - a neutral ground where, at least in the text, the

natives appear to be at a distance from both displaced parties. However, while the geopolitical displacement of the white man tends to lend him an elevated status in this paradisiacal, prelapsarian land, where he rises from a clerk or so to the pedestal of a ruler, owner, king; the displacement of the African only suffers to reduce his status from nobility, in the case of Oroonoko, to slavery; for the white man’s prelapsarian brother is the native, not the African. As it happens, the plight of the African rests in the fact that he is to be reduced to inhuman terms, to the status of a savage, in order to be reduced to a slave – all of which arises from the political impositions of colonialism and the institution of slavery. The politics of identity is such that one must be denied humanity and individuality in order to make them submit into slavery. This serves to explain the transition of the central black figure from Oroonoko to Caesar the moment he sets foot in Surinam.

It must then come as no surprise that trouble ensues when these two personas attempt to coalesce. When Oroonoko, true to his valiant self, rightfully demands the freedom of his family, he begins to appear as a nuisance to the colonisers. The heroic ideal of Oroonoko was appreciated as long as it contained itself to the legends of the African lands, or served to entertain and please the white gentry in feats such as bringing to them the heart of a terrorising tiger. As long as Oroonoko remained Caesar in Surinam, passive in his conduct and at the leisure of the European, it was convenient; but the moment Caesar begins to assert his individuality as Oroonoko upon his ‘owners’ and demands liberty, the narrator

neither thought it convenient to trust him much out of our view, nor did the Country who fear’d him; but with one accord it was advis’d to treat him Fairly, and oblige him to remain within such a compass, and that he shou’d be permitted, as seldom as cou’d be, to go up to the Plantations of the Negroes; or, if he did, to be accompany’d by some that shou’d be rather in appearance Attendants than Spys. (42)

Oroonoko has betrayed the colonisers’ trust by

seeking his freedom and now appears as a threat to the whole of the white population; hence effectively, the narrator's allegiance to the white ruling class in Surinam also makes its mark this point onwards.

It is also important to take into account the circumstances of Oroonoko's avowal of individuality and character. Charlotte Sussman evaluates

And her [Imoinda] pregnancy inspires his [Oroonoko] first plans for escape because "all the Breed is theirs to whom the Parents belong" ... To Oroonoko's thinking, the child should be the next "of his Great Race", born into the kinship network that makes Oroonoko a powerful prince. For the child to achieve such a status, however, the ties between parent and child as well as between husband and wife must be acknowledged. Only through the recognition of genealogical descent can the child receive its cultural inheritance. (Sussman 218)

Thus, in asserting his paternal claims and cultural inheritance upon his progeny over the bonds of ownership claimed by the coloniser, Oroonoko breaks his alliance to the European impression, dissociating from the heroic ideal, in order to reclaim his African roots and identity. This is not to say that there is a loss of nobility of character that he had possessed, he undeniably retains that; but there is indeed a loss of value that had been earlier associated to that noble nature. The tales of valiant conduct that once had struck awe in all of the ruling class now become agents of menace for them when the valour is witnessed first-hand. This is the point when Oroonoko truly becomes the coloniser's other, as he affirms his African identity.

And one can never forget Chinua Achebe's words in his essay on *Heart of Darkness* that the European looks at Africa as

"the other world", the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality. (Achebe 783)

Up until the time the tales of his bravery are served as legends for the purpose of entertainment and tea-time gossip, Oroonoko is amicable to the European; but the moment he tries to revolt, attempts to register his rights and equality on account of his noble and fearless character, he becomes a threat who must be effectively tortured and tormented physically, mentally, emotionally, to serve as an example to those who dare to cross the line demarcated by the coloniser.

And this is not the first instance, where the Other is assumed to be a threat on grounds of his reassertion of his civil rights. One is instantly reminded of Shakespeare's Caliban in "The Tempest", where Caliban is portrayed as an inherently evil, sexually violent creature, worthy of enslavement and subjugation – and the moment he tries to avow his claim to the island, to establish his equality, he begins to pose as a threat who must be subjected to cruelty and be treated in inhuman terms to be subdued.

From this point onwards, the narrator of *Oroonoko* quite conveniently retires to the periphery of the narrative. She distances herself from any important progression in the plot and even the author doesn't seem to have much opinion to offer – so that it seems like a mere retelling of the events. This is a problematic oscillatory approach of the author that also lends to the ambiguity, for whenever there is significant action at play, she seems to be away, unavailable to comment and act this moment forth. There are fissures that come into play in Behn's representation of Oroonoko and the narrative oscillates from the celebration of Oroonoko and critique of slavery practices of the European in the beginning to the disapproval of Oroonoko's defiance in the middle to the passive participation of the narrator in the atrocities meted out to Oroonoko near the end.

Was Oroonoko truly victorious?

The freedom and fate of Oroonoko is initially stalled and kept in the hands of the absent figure of the Lord Governor who, like Godot, never comes. Therefore there is no true victory or realisation of a heroic triumph on part of the central

black figure. Even at the close of the narrative, Oroonoko's heroic ideal does not reach its fulfilling end, for he fails to secure his freedom, his family, and even his individuality and identity. Even his celebrated honour is broken to shambles as he fails to die by his own hands with dignity. The only saving grace is his indifference to death and to the torments and insults of the coloniser. Thus, the pathetic end of Oroonoko fails to provide any resolution to the problem of slavery or the quest for freedom and denies the protagonist a comprehensive cognizance of his character and the narrative a thematic close that the text had initially promised to base its premise upon.

In fact, perhaps slavery itself was never a problem for the author as she mentions time and again the commercial gains of colonialism and the slave trade. Laura Brown tells us that

On the face of it, the treatment of slavery in *Oroonoko* is neither coherent nor fully critical. The romance motifs in Oroonoko's story, based upon the elitist focus on the fate of African "princes", render ambiguous Behn's attack on the institution of slavery, and open the way for the development of the sentimental antislavery position of the eighteenth century. But at the same time, the representation of trade and consumption, readily extended to the trade in slaves and the consumption of Oroonoko himself, and specifically imagined through a female sensibility, tends to render colonialism unambiguously attractive. This incoherence in the novella's treatment of slavery can be felt at various points in the course of the narrative. (Brown)

However, the capitalist approach to the institution of slavery or the lack of any moral scruples towards the very idea behind the advent of the trade was nothing new to the European of the day, and throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century, there was a lot of uncertainty enveloping the idea of the Other, so we can hardly blame Behn for her conflicted views. Moreover, her attempt is indeed commendable for it at least begins a dialogue on the atrocities of slavery. But the incoherence of

her own ideas, her changing allegiances and the oscillatory pattern of the narrative fail to provide a comprehensive heroic character – and thus with the bifurcation of attitudes, we see the dichotomy of character in Oroonoko, who seems to be a composite of two different personas – one, a noble prince, and another, a royal savage. This is how the character is split in the middle - between Oroonoko and Caesar, two different personas residing in one body throughout the narrative. And like the fragments of his body tossed about at the end of the narrative, his character too remains fragmented in the mind of the reader – a hazy image of a potential hero.

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