

Gender in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*:
A comparative analysis of representation of
Oroonoko and Imoinda

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In her influential analysis of *Oroonoko*, Laura Brown identifies it as a 'seminal work in the tradition of anti-slavery writings', and recognises the text's multifarious potential areas of study.¹ Nevertheless, she warns against an indiscriminate application of the notion of the 'other' for any analysis, owing to its inherent constraints of compartmentalised binaries (Brown, p. 28). Instead, she insists on formulating a model that may provide an opportunity to study the dialectical operations of race and gender in *Oroonoko*. However, her central argument hinges on the white female homodiegetic narrator, allocating her agency both as the producer of the narrative and the consumer of the colonial enterprise and slavery. She also explores Aphra Behn's political position to attend to *Oroonoko*'s complex political allegory and calls it 'nothing less than the reenactment of the most traumatic event of the [English] revolution, the execution of Charles I' (Brown, p. 55). Similarly, Margaret W. Ferguson, while mindful of the

¹ Laura Brown, 'The Romance of Empire', in *Ends of Empire: Women and Ideology in Early Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 23–63 (p. 25). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

anachronistic nature of the categories of race, class and gender, reflects on how they work in a ‘mutually determining fashion’ in *Oroonoko*, and expands these terms as the ‘types of systemic inequities’, making them ‘relational rather than foundational’.² However, Ferguson too devotes her analysis to the ‘peculiarities of [Behn’s] multiple and shifting class positions’ (Ferguson, p. 213). A plethora of Behn’s biographies and the skirmishes on the historical question of her visit to Guiana further overwhelm the critical analysis of *Oroonoko*. As Joanna Lipking states, ‘the more widely *Oroonoko* has been read, the more deeply it has been searched for Behn’s entanglements’.³ This essay acknowledges that being conscious of the fluidity between gender, race and class within *Oroonoko* is beneficial; however, an extensive focus on their operation as a subject between the author and the text tends to ignore their operation within the narrative. This essay aims to examine the representation of gender within *Oroonoko* by undertaking a comparative study of *Oroonoko* and *Imoinda*, and demonstrate that in a quest to create a version of *Oroonoko* that may claim sympathy—a pre-requisite so that the atrocities of slavery (rather than slavery itself) may be exposed for criticism—the text ignores *Imoinda*’s subjugation to patriarchal and chattel slavery. The argument will be extended by using John Locke’s ideological justifications of slavery in establishing how the usurpation of these justifications reinforces the gendered difference in favour of *Oroonoko*. It will be evidenced by an examination of the difference in the characterisation of *Oroonoko* and *Imoinda* in the African settings, in the mode of their subjection into slavery, and in their treatment on the Surinam plantation.

In his discussion of the appearance of formal realism in the novel, Ian Watt argues that even when many seventeenth-century writers ‘had overtly professed a wholly realistic aim’,

² Margaret W. Ferguson, ‘Juggling the categories of Race, Class and Gender: Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*’, in *Women, ‘Race’ & Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. by Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 209–24 (pp. 212–13). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

³ Joanna Lipking, ‘Others, Slaves and Colonists’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Aphra Behn*, ed. by Derek Hughes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 166–87 (p. 166).

they did not bring about ‘the full rejection of all the non-realistic conventions that governed the genre’.⁴ Behn’s claim in the dedicatory epistle that ‘what I have mentioned I have taken care should be truth’, comes with an insistence on how ‘these countries...*so differ from ours* that they produce inconceivable wonders’ (italics added).⁵ Behn sets the expectation and defence for what Edward Said recognises as an Orientalist gaze towards Africa. Orientalism, for Said, is ‘a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and “the Occident”’.⁶ The details about Africa are claimed to have been ‘received from the mouth’ of Oroonoko (Behn, p. 9), but impress more as a combination of the romantic genre and orientalist discourse that fashion a heroic image of Oroonoko while objectifying Imoinda as a subject of male desire. The difference between the depiction of Oroonoko and Imoinda is rationalised by relying on the local traditions of the Africans. This is aligned with what Mary Louise Pratt explains as the strategy of ‘reductive normalising’ through which the foreign is naturalised by the imperial observer.⁷ The African ‘portrait of manners and customs’ unconsciously justifies the difference in the text’s approach towards the two protagonists (Pratt, p. 120).

While investigating the fictional and factual aspects of *Oroonoko*, Katharine Rogers concludes that ‘the adventures at the court of Coramantien suspiciously resemble those of Restoration heroic drama’.⁸ Oroonoko is epitomised as the greatest hero and greatest lover in the tradition of heroic romance by a combination of supernatural beauty and extraordinary valour.

⁴ Ian Watt, ‘Realism and the Novel form’, in *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), pp. 9–34 (p. 33).

⁵ Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 5. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁶ Edward Said, ‘Introduction’, in *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), pp. 1–28 (p. 2).

⁷ Mary Louise Pratt, ‘Scratches on the Face of the Country’, *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1985), 119–43 (p. 121). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁸ Katharine M. Rogers, ‘Fact and Fiction in Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*’, *Studies in the Novel*, 20 (1988), 1–15 (p. 3).

He became, at the age of seventeen, one of the most expert captains and bravest soldiers that ever saw the field of Mars [...] Besides, he was adorned with a native beauty so transcending all of his gloomy race, that he struck an awe and reverence even in those that knew not his quality.

(Behn, p. 13)

His description is paralleled by the characteristics of the characters in the romance genre. In Markman Ellis' words, he is 'beautiful because virtuous, virtuous because beautiful'.⁹ Oroonoko's surveillance by the King's soldiers and their invasion into Imoinda's chamber as he lay with her, followed by Oroonoko's gallant heroism in challenging them (Behn, pp. 28–30), is reminiscent of a similar scene in the courtly romance saga of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere.¹⁰ Oroonoko's idealisation, his allegiance to the chivalric and aristocratic values, and the code of love and honour, add to his heroic image. Furthermore, the text improvises on Oroonoko's personality by superimposing this image with the European ideals. As Oddvar Holmesland elucidates, 'his noble savage features are oddly consonant with noble qualities naturalised by a European aristocratic order'.¹¹ Both in his appearance and his intellectual capacities, Oroonoko is differentiated from the Africans and equated with the Europeans.

He had nothing of barbarity in his nature, but in all points addressed himself as if his education had been in some European court [...] his nose was rising and Roman instead of African and flat. His mouth [was] far from those great turned lips which are so natural to the rest of the

⁹ Markman Ellis, Seminar Handout on *Oroonoko*.

¹⁰ Sir Thomas Malory, 'Morte Arthur', in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 9th edn, ed. by Stephan Greenblatt and others (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), pp. 482–486.

¹¹ Oddvar Holmesland, 'Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*: Cultural Dialectics and the Novel', *ELH*, 68 (2001), 57–79 (p. 58).

Negroes [...] His discourse was admirable upon almost any subject, and whoever had heard him speak would have been convinced of their errors that all fine wit is confined to white men.

(Behn, p. 15)

In the same African settings, the text's matter of fact narration about the oppression of women through polygamy, maintenance of the King's harem and women's adultery being punishable by execution or sale into slavery, is a precursor of *Oroonoko's* indifference towards Imoinda's fate. It doesn't flinch at Imoinda's reduction into a measure for male honour, her commodification narrowed to her virginity. In Bakhtin's language of the dialogic discourse in the novel, Imoinda's utterance is material only when it is used to 'satisfy [Oroonoko] in: whether she was robbed of that blessing which was only due to his faith and love' (Behn, p. 21). As she becomes a site of competition between two males, her vocal resistance in an attempt to protect the same modesty is earlier ignored by the King (Behn, p. 19) and is silenced when Oroonoko '[ravages] her in a moment' (Behn, p. 29). Deeply patriarchal as it is, Oroonoko's victory converts Imoinda into a 'polluted thing', drawing the punishment of being sold into slavery, the 'cruel sentence, worse than death' (Behn, p. 31). The difference in the portrayal of both the characters elevates Oroonoko in the reader's esteem, facilitating the perception of his subsequent enslavement as anathema, but the gendered narrative of the male honour deprives Imoinda of her human reality to attract any criticism upon her enslavement.

This gendered differentiation is again visible in the generation of sentiments upon the manner in which Oroonoko is taken into slavery. The justification of the institution of slavery lies in the mode of procurement of slaves in both African and European ideologies. The text argues that 'being always in hostility with one neighbouring prince or other, [Coramantiens] had the fortune to take a great many captives; for all they took in battle were sold as slaves' (Behn, p. 13). Oroonoko himself took slaves as trophies for victory in war. He presented

Imoinda ‘with those slaves that had been taken in [the] last battle’ and also trafficked in such slaves with the commander of the British ship (Behn, pp. 16, 36). His principal argument in his harangue to the slaves in Surinam also lies in this practice. ‘Have [the owners] vanquished us nobly in fight? Have they won us in honourable battle? And are we by the chance of war become their slaves?’ he asks (Behn, p. 62). Incidentally, this is similar to Locke’s justification for slavery in his theory of just-war. After expanding on the ideas of freedom and equality of men in the state of nature, Locke defines the state of war, which is activated when an aggressor ‘attempts to get another Man into his Absolute Power’— make him a slave.¹² Locke considers it lawful to kill ‘whoever introduces a State of War, and is *aggressor* in it’ (Locke, §18, p. 280). Such aggressor,

By his fault forfeit[s] his own life [...] [and] he, to whom he has forfeited it, may (when he has him in his power) delay to take it, and make use of him to his own service, and he does him no injury by it.

(Locke, §23, p. 284)

As the victor may delay to inflict death and instead make the aggressor a slave, Locke concludes that ‘the perfect condition of slavery is nothing else, but the state of war continued, between a lawful conqueror and a captive’ (Locke, §24, p. 284). However, Oroonoko’s initiation in ‘the condition of total servitude’ is not as an ‘unjust aggressor taken captive in war’.¹³ David Brion Davis in his groundbreaking work outlines the complex interface of religion, law, business interests and the rumoured facts about Africa that informed British sensibilities to determine the legitimate ways of obtaining slaves for American colonies. He

¹² John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, Student Edition, ed. by Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), §17, p. 279. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹³ James Farr, ‘Locke, Natural Law, and New World Slavery’, *Political Theory*, 36 (2008), 495–522 (p. 496).

discusses rulings that differentiated between ‘lawful captives and victims of unjust violence’ and ‘condemned treachery, deceit and manstealing’.¹⁴ By portraying Oroonoko as a victim of unjust violence and treachery, the narrative withholds traditional, philosophical or legal support for his dramatic kidnapping, and successfully creates pathos in his favour by rendering his enslavement as illegitimate. Painfully though, the narrative’s uncritical reception of Imoinda’s oppression and her actual sale into slavery, leans on the normalisation of traditional and patriarchal narrative of unequal gender relations in her society. She gets what she deserves as per the African customs.

Predictably, the subsequent narrative continues to maintain Oroonoko’s exclusive status to censure his slavery. His royal prestige is not lost in spite of his capture. The captain found it ‘necessary to free the prince from his irons’ because the prisoners refused to eat until they could see their prince, and he was ‘treated with all the respect due to his birth’ (Behn, pp. 39–40). His position is reconfirmed during his journey to the plantation upon arrival in Surinam as ‘the fame of Oroonoko was gone before him’ (Behn, p. 43). His princely eminence attracts the devotion of his countrymen on the plantation and ‘they all cast themselves at his feet, crying out in their language, *Live, O King! Long live, O King!*’ (Behn, p. 44). Besides, the narrative overtly resists him being treated as a slave. He is not made to work, ‘it was more for form than any design to put him to his task, he endured no more of the slave but the name’ (Behn, p. 44) and is involved socially with the plantation owners, both males and females. This all hinders his inception and adaptation as a slave in the plantation. Stanley M. Elkins, in his study of the slave personalities in the ante-bellum period, explains the detachment of the Negro from his cultural backgrounds that is achieved by the ‘shock experience [of] procurement’. He stresses on how they had to adapt with the authority system they were introduced to for their

¹⁴ David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), pp. 197–98.

physical and psychic survival, concluding an adjustment to clear and omnipresent authority as ‘more or less automatic’.¹⁵ Nothing of that kind is experienced by Oroonoko. Oroonoko is awarded a social station entirely different from what Locke foresees for the slaves who—

Being captives taken in a just war, are by the right of nature subjected to the absolute dominion and arbitrary power of their masters. These men [...] being in the state of slavery [...] cannot in that state be considered as any part of civil society.

(Locke, §85, pp. 322–23)

He maintains his identity as a royal prince in complete disregard to the practical fact that the slaves on the plantation were procured from different tribes and may not even share a common language, let alone a common leader.¹⁶ In contrast, the narrative elides Imoinda’s journey to the plantation from both the story and the discourse time of the novella. She reappears as Clemene, a sexual prey ‘adorned with the most graceful modesty...and so retired, as if she feared a rape even from the God of Day’ (Behn, p. 45). She is hounded both by a ‘hundred white men’ and ‘all the slaves [who are] perpetually at her feet’ (Behn, pp. 16, 45). Her fortune transforms only upon her identification as Caesar’s Imoinda, and then she is ‘paid treble respect’ (Behn, p. 48). Imoinda’s chastity is used to exemplify Oroonoko by reserving her for ‘a prince of her own nation’ (Behn, p. 16). Besides being sexualised, she is commercialised too in slavery as is apparent in her removal from the site of Oroonoko’s torture ‘for the fear she should die with the sight or miscarry, and then they should lose a young slave, and perhaps a

¹⁵ Stanley M. Elkins, ‘Slavery and Personality’, in *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, 3rd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 81–139 (pp. 83, 88–9). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁶ ‘On the Gold coast alone, no more than sixty miles in length, “seven or eight several languages so different that three or four of them are interchangeably unintelligent to any but the respective natives” were spoken’ (William Bosman, cited in Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, 3rd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 91).

mother' (Behn, p. 68). Elkins quotes the details of a will in which 'a woman "bequeathed to one daughter, [...] a negress and the third child to be born of her; to the second daughter, [...] the first and second child to be born of the same woman"' (Elkins, p. 50). This shows how the value of the future child of the slave was also accounted for under slavery. This practice conflicts with Locke's assertion that 'the father, by his miscarriages and violence, can forfeit but his own life, but involves not his children in his guilt or destruction' (Locke, §182, p. 389). The narrative again utilises the schism between the ideology and the lived reality to garner sympathy for Oroonoko. It is Imoinda's pregnancy coupled with Oroonoko's understanding that 'all the breed is theirs to whom the parents belong' that 'makes him more impatient for liberty', eventually leading to the rebellion (Behn, p. 48).

Elkins observes that the 'African tribesman was the product of cultural traditions essentially heroic in nature [...] something very profound would have had to intervene in order to obliterate all this and to reduce, on the American plantation, a society of helpless dependents' (Elkins, p. 98). Oroonoko is spared such obliteration. The narrative's investment in maintaining him as a royal and heroic figure, different from the slaves who chose to 'yield and live', proves significant in both glorifying Oroonoko, and strengthening the alliance between the narrator and Oroonoko (Behn, p. 65). As argued in the beginning of the essay, the narrator is selective in criticising Oroonoko's enslavement rather than the practice of slavery itself. The narrator herself is aligned with the slave- owner white English colonists, and Oroonoko too has been a beneficiary of the system of slavery. In this background, the veneration of Oroonoko by 'othering' the other African slaves shifts his identity closer to that of the narrator, garnering support against his enslavement from the predominantly white prospective readers. Oroonoko is depicted as different from the common slaves, and simultaneously, identifiable with the white colonists. This strategy is instrumental in building and precipitating his tragic end and accords him nobility even in death. In contrast, Imoinda's body is morphed as an opportunity

of male revenge. Oroonoko feared that ‘she may be first ravaged by every brute, exposed first to their nasty lusts, and then a shameful death’. Additionally, the narrative considers her passive acquiescence in her murder reasonable because among Coramantiens ‘when a man finds any occasion to quit his wife, if he love her, she dies by his hand’ (Behn, p. 71). Ironically, she is neglected even in death. Her corpse is denied visibility and is indicated only by a ‘stink’ (Behn, p. 73). The future stage adaptations of the story continued to hide her behind a whitewashed Imoinda to ensure the audience’s emotional involvement in Oroonoko. Joyce Green MacDonald argues that Imoinda’s identity is jeopardised as the ‘audiences had a ready-made sentimental frame of reference for a miscegenous *Oroonoko*, but not for one whose enslaved lovers were of the same race’.¹⁷

Oroonoko’s European and heroic sensibilities, the illegitimacy of his capture and his elevated status on the plantation ensures his inadaptability as a slave that makes his enslavement and the climactic spectacle of the horror of his death, exceedingly deplorable. However, Imoinda’s victimisation under the double discourse of slavery and patriarchy is tacitly accepted. While Imoinda remains textually present till the very end—the novella ends on the word ‘Imoinda’—any attempt to treat her with equal humanity as Oroonoko, eludes *Oroonoko*.

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