

REVISITING APHRA BEHN'S TREATMENT OF SLAVERY: A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT: *Historical literature is usually believed to be based on true stories. It was this conceptualization that contributed significantly toward fictional constructions of world views of different peoples. Aphra Behn's Oroonoko was one of literary texts that theorized slavery as necessary evil and this theorization was accepted and acclaimed critically. However, in this study looking at the text from a postcolonial perspective, I argue that Aphra Behn's treatment of the practice of enslavement is based on ethnic discrimination. Therefore she theorizes slavery in colonial framework and thus extends colonial agenda.*

Keywords: Aphra Behn, slavery, postcolonial study

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND:

Hassan M. Rwat's definition of slavery is: "Slavery is involuntary servitude imposed upon a person by another person or persons. Absence of volition of man in his actions, or forced servitude, is Slavery" [1].

Slavery prevailed almost all over the antique world. In the Greek era, it was in organizing form. According to Aristotle, it is justified in some circumstances but Plato was against it. The same situation can be seen in Roman era. According to Roman law, the masters have the authority to do with their slaves whatever they want [1].

At the end of Fifteenth Century, when Spain and Portugal defeated the Arabs, the subjugated Muslims were the first ones who were pushed towards slavery. They were asked to select one option out of the three that were presented to them: Christianity, Exile or Slavery. Those who denied submitting themselves were persecuted [1].

However, the institution commercial of slavery comes into organized form when Columbus discovered America in 1492. Consequently, Spain and Portugal became the founders of slavery. Since the Red Indians could not bear the hard labor of mining they were exposed to, they died out fast. In these circumstances, the Spanish colonists were facing the problem of workforce. Bartolome de La Casas, the Roman Catholic Spanish Bishop, requested the king to grant permission to the Spanish colonists to transport Negro slaves from Africa. In 1517, the King gave the consent for importing Negro slaves to the rich plantation owners in America. From here emerges one of the most oppressed labour forces: "the Negro plantation slavery." The slaves for Portuguese were brought from West African coast to West Indies. Afterwards, the Dutch, the French and the British were issued "assientos" (in essence a special right to buy slaves from Africa and sell them in Americas), to import slaves from Africa to the Spanish America [1].

British entered into the coast of Africa in 1530, by the first voyage of William Hawkins to the Guinean Coast. Following his father's footsteps, John Hawkins departed from the coast of England in October, 1562, and sailed to the coast of Guinea. In this voyage he got almost three hundred slaves. Then he sailed to Hispaniola and sailing from port to port, he sold all his cargoes [1].

According to Joanna Lipking, during Aphara Behn's stay in Surinam and the publication of *Oroonoko* in 1688-England's slave trade was in full swung because they were

in need of slaves for their planters in Barbados, Jamaica and Surinam. In 1660, Charles II established a company to handle and manage the matters of slave trade with the help of his brother who was duke of York; who was also known as James II, as governor and chief shareholder in the company. In this regard, the first two English ships sent out for slave-trade to the Gold Coast, what was then called Guinea, were named as the Charles and the James [2]. Therefore, in Lipking's view, Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* in itself is a part of dark history of slavery.

Nowhere, Behn criticized the slavery in her novel. The narrator does not condemn the intrigue for the enslavement of African Prince, Oroonoko. Rather, the decision of this brutal act, regarding its being good or bad is left upto the reader's own understanding. Behn's failure to criticize the ongoing practice of slavery evidently shows her sincerity towards the colonial forces. She seems to conform to the idea, presented by Jean Baptiste Du Tertre, a Dominican missionary, who had a comprehensive view about the French occupied islands: "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" [2].

The masters not only have control over their slaves but also have the right to enslave the unhappy offspring born out of forced marriages among the slave community. It was mainly because of this reason that Oroonoko murdered his wife, Imoinda, alongwith the conceived child in order to protect her lineage from the stains of eternal slavery. In order to create a new independent colony, he urges his fellow-slaves to firmly stand up against the colonial atrocities. His undying passion for liberty is clearly reflected in the following lines: "At least, they shou'd be made Free in his Kingdom, and be Esteemed as his Fellow-sufferers, and Men that has 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" [2].

This shows hero's strong indignation to the institution of commercial slavery and at the same time the slaves' commitment to get freedom from their cruel masters. Resultantly, the violence is an inevitable part of Behn's *Oroonoko*. The colonists were always in the dire need of workforce to keep their plantations operational. In this perspective, the African men and women were brought to the Caribbean islands.

The violence that commenced in the beginning scene of the novel gradually gets rhythm and in the ending part of the novel it is in its full swing. The white who whipped Oroonoko acts very brutally in rendering the flesh from 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 [2].

This is a historical fact that the institution of slavery was employed to dehumanize and deculturise the subjugated races. In fact this was the justice, knowledge, civilization and morality that whites supplied to their distant territories. The apparent masculine behavior of Oroonoko in this tragic scene does undoubtedly reinstate the fact that the hero willfully is breaking down any type of relation with the colonial authorities or even with the narrator itself.

Similarly, the immense brutality, the racial and sexual conflicts that the narrator failed to resolve in the novel emphatically point out that she does side with the colonists. In other words, the European 'self' has a special prerogative to enslave others. Hassan maintains: "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" [3].

2. Behn's Attitude toward Slavery

According to Joanna Lipking, the workforce from Africa that consisted of slaves was utilized for the benefit of the colonizers. Surinam, which serves as setting of the novel was a short-lived colony of England. In its apogee, in 1665, the colony was almost having thousand slaves, who were working on plantations [4].

The racial discrimination was the ground on which the edifice of the institution of slavery was based. Henry Whistler, who stayed at Barbados for nearly two months, to challenge the Spanish forces present in the West and who remained successful in getting the control of Jamaica after few defeats, wrote about the richness and fertility of this Island, and while talking about its social structure said: "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" [2].

In the above-quoted lines, the Negroes are relegated to the last stage in the nation-wise hierarchical description. The similar attitude is observable in the study at hand. We do not see Behn anywhere in the novel condemning this barbarous and inhuman 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.

Oroonoko, the Royal Slave, was deceptively enslaved by the ship captain, with whom he himself used to trade in slaves. The ship captain very tactfully asked Oroonoko to honor his vessel with his presence and to have a dinner with him before he sets sail. As soon as he was on board, he felt that he has been deceived because he was fastened down with

iron. Although Oroonoko demonstrated a strong resistance to this form of oppression on solid grounds; yet, by any means the captain was successful in transporting him to the then English colony, Surinam and finally selling him to the slave-traders. This is really a very crucial moment in the novel as the true nature of the narrator is clearly unfolded to the readers, regarding conception of slavery. Instead of censuring the captain's hypocritical act, she leaves it up to her readers. This, in turn becomes an ample proof for her association, sympathy and loyalty with the oppressing colonial forces. "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 guess'd, in what manner the Prince resented this Indignity,... so he rag'd, so he struggl'd for Liberty, but all in vain [2].

Though she regards Captain's act as "Treachery" [2]; yet she is hesitant to condemn it and therefore she steps backward from passing her own judgment on the infamous and inhuman act of the ship captain.

Moreover, Aphra Behn constructs and consolidates Africa absolutely on Eurocentric perspective and altogether in a discursive framework that Moira Ferguson favours to term "an Anglo-African discourse". She herself defines this phenomenon in the following way; a discourse in which we can trace the unremitting and intensified negative attitudes of the colonists towards Africans in general, and to slaves in particular [5].

The narrator informs her readers about the prevalent custom of Christians that whenever they buy some slaves they instantly change their names, because their native names look barbarous to their masters. The same treatment was made with Oroonoko and Imoinda, since their names were also altered to 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, so that Mr. Trefery gave Oroonoko that of Caesar; which Name will live in that Country" [2].

These lines clearly indicate her close attachment and association with the Western ideology, which is not only effective in bringing slaves but also useful in transforming them from their "barbarous" and "uncivilized" background to the "enlightened" colonial values. The narrator affirms that she herself would not call her hero, Oroonoko which is his native name, but with the name that is bestowed upon him by Western civilized slave-masters: that is of Caesar. The narrator seems to be of the view that the cause of his name's being changed is to root out the innate barbarous elements that his name contained.

Besides this, the hero in the "Western World" would remain alive not as Oroonoko but as Caesar. The actual issue with the narrator is that she desires to be known as an impartial historian at any cost; therefore she does not want to be lined-up with the colonial domineering powers. Nevertheless she failed to keep her neutrality; as in reality, she is involved in the process of exterminating the "self" of African Prince into a disfigured body, as soon as it becomes an absolute form of European entity. Thus they can mould it and reshape it the

way they like it, and this in turn, exhibits an evident proof of the narrator's complicity with the European settlers.

3. **Behn's manipulation of various 'discursions'**

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 the European planters. The colonial pioneers kept on filling Oroonoko's mind with 'false assurances' regarding his independency. She categorically informs us about this dishonest treatment; they "fed him from day to day with Promises" [2]. The narrator, who is the 'Great Mistress' of the hero, likewise endeavors her utmost to impact her hero's well-liked, Imoinda. She usually will narrate to her the stories of "Nuns" and at every moment she was undertaking her cherished task, to enlighten her with actual knowledge of a "true God". Oroonoko was also being entertained by her great mistress with the lives of 'great Men' and Romans.

Therefore whenever the colonists envisioned any sign of approaching uprisings on the part of Oroonoko, they approached the narrator to convince him to wait till the arrival of the Lord Governor Willoughby to Surinam. And in fact she did it, by urging Oroonoko to take a daring trip to one of the native Indians' tribes; another successful "intrigue" on the part of the narrator: "She encourages the royal slave to take several pleasant diversion-hunting tigers, fishing, visiting Surinam Indians- the real purpose of which is to divert his thoughts from rebellion. She seems to be acting entirely, and with typical duplicity, as a European" [6].

Thus, it is clear that the narrator does not have any sincerity-based sympathetic bond with her hero; rather, we need to evaluate this relation on the basis of slave-master dichotomy.

4. **Ethnicity-oriented discrimination and Slavery in Oroonoko**

Although, Oroonoko was enslaved alongwith a 'French-Man'; who was his tutor also yet the latter one was guaranteed that he shall be set free when they come to land. "Except the French-Man, whom the Captain could not pretend to keep Prisoner, but only told him he was secured, because he might act something in favor of the Prince, but that he shou'd be freed as soon as they came to Land" [2].

These lines evidently demonstrate the dual nature of the European intelligentsia to categorize the world purely on ethnic grounds. Therefore the initial institutionalization of modern commercial slavery was based on ethnicity and this in turn provides Europeans an effective tool to dehumanize the rest of the races in the world. If someone belongs to the European race, he simply cannot be treated as a slave, because he is ethnically superior to others.

In this regard, Bill Ashcroft et al while tracing the history and the development of commercial slavery have therefore emphatically stated that it was only due to the development racism in the post-renaissance period that helped in giving birth to the commercial slavery phenomenon. This was such a brutal and immoral act on the part of colonial usurping forces that "from which only few could ever hope to achieve full manumission" or legal freedom: "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 distangle them" [7].

So the 'French-Man' was granted freedom to earn his livelihood. This incidence shows that Behn is in fact reinforcing and the same time celebrating her ethnic as well as Christian religion superiority, since he was Christian by faith so he cannot be made slave. This is an inherent flaw and paradox in the European ideological framework.

5. **Violence in Oroonoko and Oroonoko's struggle for liberty**

In the beginning of the novella, we see the narrator trying to establish a sympathetic bond with her hero, but gradually Oroonoko came to discover that the inner self of the European masters is badly corrupted, so being fed up with day to day promises by the plantation-owners regarding his freedom; he finally resolved to stand firmly against his oppressors and urged his fellow-slaves to fight for freedom and emancipation. Moreover Oroonoko's wife Imoinda conceived a child, and this new happening accelerated the urge for liberty in the heart of Oroonoko and resultantly he was 'impatient for liberty'; for he wanted to protect his race from the eternal stains of slavery.

He planned to teach an unforgettable lesson to the "tyrants" who imposed slavery on him and dehumanized his "self". In this regard, he successfully directed his fellows to stage a decisive revolt against these usurpers; otherwise they have to suffer at the hands of their masters not for months or years 'but for eternity'. He began to convince his fellows that slavery was not a matter of months or years "but for eternity". He told them that the conditions in which they are; "were fitter for beast than men" and at the same time there does not seem any end to this on-going misery. He delivered a memorable and remarkable speech on the importance of liberty and every word of it is borne with emancipationist crave: "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" [2].

In these lines we see a comprehensive account of the emotions of the hero against the cruel treatment and mental agony that he suffered at the hands of his masters. In this speech his companions saw a ray of hope and they determined to snatch back their inborn right of manumission and retain their lost glory.

Fanon has argued that the process of decolonization is always a violent phenomenon. The colonized societies desire to break down the shackles in which have been destined by the occupiers. In other words they move on to generate or reshape the existing system or the order of their societies; hence it is a "program of complete disorder" [8]. In Fanon's view, violence is an integral part of a distant land and its dwellers or colonized masses are well-aware of the fact that this is the only effective weapon in their hands against the settlers. Whether they want to get rid of their assailants or

seek to make their land free from their curbs; in either case they have to employ the use of force [8].

Therefore Oroonoko with the help of his fellow-slaves eventually resolved to stage a revolt against the plantation-owners. For this purpose, they commenced a march in the night. Nevertheless, they have not gone far away when they were located by the colonial forces. The narrator maintains: "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" [2].

These lines clearly put forward the idea that the narrator, the mouthpiece of the writer, does not have any humane feelings for her hero, rather she has altogether detached herself from him; since the plural personal pronouns such as 'we' and likewise 'us' exhibit her close association with her own European race. She is practically partaking in the process of dehumanizing the African slaves. The phrase "depriving us all the slaves" reinstates her separateness from her hero on absolute grounds. In this regard, Anne Fogarty is of the viewpoint that Behn succeeded neither in condemning the institution of slavery nor asserting that the marginalized groups, such as women in general and slaves in particular do share a collective experience in this world [9].

During the struggle of liberty, Oroonoko's fellows deserted him by surrendering themselves in front of the Whites, but the hero stood firm to his cause and denied to yield himself to the colonial authorities. The colonists gave all possible assurances to Oroonoko that if he lays down his arms, he would be honored. However he declined down the offers by declaring that one should be 'eternally on Guard' with the Whites or Christians and even he went on to advise the human beings that if in any circumstances they have to eat with the Whites or Christians, they should carry arms with themselves for their own security: "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" [2].

The so called magnificent castle of the European Civilization looks like the shattered pieces of a broken mirror. The hero has known the true nature of the colonists. He is not ready to trust them anymore. The image of harmonious coexistence that the narrator was toiling to depict among the various communities residing in Surinam has almost vanished away and seen nowhere now. Until now he was just like a puppet in the hands of the narrator, but now he is really asserting his uniqueness and proving his identity on solid ground. As a result, the narrator has also lost the status of being his "Great Mistress", because he has got rid of the narrator, to prove his honor and self-esteem.

At last, however, the colonists were able to convince the hero to surrender and therefore after having repeated assurances of honor and respect from the colonists, Oroonoko surrendered on the conditions and terms that he will not be humiliated, but this time, once again he was trapped, as he was mercilessly tortured by the English colonists. When the colonists were completely satisfied with their revenge on him, they left him with thousand bruises on

his body; and "to complete their cruelty" they sprinkled "Indian Pepper" on his wounded body. Fanon's remarks are worth-quoting in this perspective: "At level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect, Even if the armed struggle has been symbolic and the nation is demobilized through a rapid movement of decolonization" [8].

Oroonoko's violent struggle is a perfect embodiment of what Fanon has referred to in the above-quoted lines. Oroonoko extends the scope of his emancipationist designs to his wife, Imoinda by murdering her, for he did not want to perpetuate the enslavement to his next offspring, and "a prey to his enemies". Therefore it is a unique form of resistance in the recorded history of the institution of commercial slavery.

As it is through a well-settled genealogical descent that any child can gain his/her cultural inheritance; so Charlotte Sussman is of the view that by murdering Imoinda, Oroonoko in fact resisted the possibility of his child's being born in an alienated or foreign setting [10].

These illustrations are eye-opening, regarding hero's resolute and his discovery of possible sites of resistance and targeting the unbearable regime. He responded back to the colonists in a very aggressive and violent tone from every corner, from wherever he thought he could resist their inhuman conduct. In the meanwhile, the narrator tells her reader about the physical condition of her hero after he has exiled the body of his wife from the world: "he Roar'd like some Monster of the Wood". Thus, Oroonoko commenced his journey from a state prince to a royal slave, and from the latter one to an unrestricted form of barbarity, and an image of monster. The depiction of Oroonoko in such monstrous manners once again does indicate the narrator's colliding with the colonists and adhering to the colonial discourse.

When Oroonoko was located in the jungle lying in a much debilitated physical state, the colonial militia brought him back to the plantations, where within five or six days he was able to recover his senses. Nonetheless, when the narrator once again tries to influence him and reminds her previous promises, he instantly rejects the offer by audaciously proclaiming that he would prefer death than to live with the Whites, whom he terms 'Dogs': 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 of his love to Imoinda, to imagine we could flatter him to life again [2].

So the nation, who presented itself to the world as the torch-bearer of civilization and knowledge and regarded itself as the explorer of the 'other world' or in particular sense 'new world' is being investigated by an African slave, who does not even think of it as a suitable community to live with. Because according to him this nation is altogether deprived of moral considerations besides of course their inner-self being thoroughly corrupted.

But it is a great tragedy for Oroonoko, who learnt this lesson so late that he could not save himself from termination of the world and according to Robert L. Chibka this was due to the

narrator's insistence on 'truth-telling' that he failed to comprehend the hidden intention or motives of his 'Great-Mistress', who was actually working on colonial agenda to divert her hero's attention from any sort of revolt against his masters [11].

So here we notice that a clear-cut line is drawn between the "self" of the European colonists, whose spokesperson is the narrator, and in fact the author of this novel; and that of the African peoples, whose representative is Oroonoko, who kept on fighting and exhibiting a strong resistance as well as opposing the slave-culture from the core of his heart till his final breath.

The last few moments of Oroonoko's life on the face of that alien world are very much crucial in highlighting the intense brutal treatment by the colonists to their slaves in general and to Oroonoko in particular. The colonial authority decided to make Oroonoko an exemplary figure for all other slaves so that they may be intimidated for forever by his punishment. The scene of his being lashed or slaughtered and Oroonoko's indifference to the corporal punishment does demonstrate his ethnic difference that the narrator could not minimize: "And 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 Smoked 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" [2].

The deformed and terrifying delineation of the cigarette-smoking Oroonoko, being slowly and surely led to death is very crucial in highlighting the eventual and lasting reminder that the gap or fissure, splitting the Whites and their Slaves/Others in a pioneering locale cannot be bridged up. Accordingly, the division between "us" and "them" is fortified not decreased. According to the story-teller, Oroonoko is a dreadful person not because he is a man denied of his autonomy but because he is an ousted King/Prince. Therefore, it may be denoted that Behn does not set out to denounce the establishment of commercial slavery but the injustices and inabilities in operating the new land of Surinam.

This is the profound civilization and knowledge that the Whites were eager to transfer to their 'Others'. In order to fulfill their cherished goal, they continued to eliminate the 'beasts and barbarous elements' like Oroonoko from the surface of the world. Fanon is therefore of the view that the documented history of the colonized peoples clearly tells us that the opposition to colonial regime does not follow a straight forward line of action or nationalism. For a very long period of time the natives have spent their energies to ousting certain abuses such as "forced labor", physical punishment, unequal distribution of resources and the limitation of their political rights [8].

6. CONCLUSION:

From this perspective Oroonoko can be regarded one of the most effective voices against such sort of colonial atrocities. The prosperity of today's modern Europe, its marvelous edifice of great civilization is actually built up and cemented with the dead bodies of the slaves of the 'new world', Frantz Fanon has aptly remarked: "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" [8]. By yielding his life in a steady undertaking to obtain liberty from the foreigners, Oroonoko turned up as a genuine champion for his community and an effective mark of rebellion against the inhuman act and atrocities of the colonists.

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