

Re-reading Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* as a Tale of Subjectivity and Passion

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Abstract

Aphra Behn (1640-1648) was one of the pioneering figures in the domain of long prose in English. Her *Love Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1687) and *Oroonoko* (1688) are some of the early English novels written in the 17th Century. *Oroonoko* is a novella of around seventy pages yet it abounds with certain themes and motifs which make it relevant till date. Certain question which inevitably come up. What are dominant ideas revealed in Behn's *Oroonoko*? How does Behn raise the issue of subjectivity and passion in *Oroonoko*? What is the significanc and contribution of Behn as a novelist to English novel? Lastly, what is the narrative technique used by her to demonstrate her idea in *Oroonoko*? It is to answer questions such as these that the text will look deeper into the world of Oroonoko through the lens of subjectivity and passion.

Keywords: British Novels, Women Novelists, Subjectivity, Passion.

Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) writes, "All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds." (34) Woolf completely thoroughly appreciates the path breaking steps taken by Aphra Behn for picking up writing. She has made the task easier for the rest of the woman writers. *Oroonoko* is one of the finest works of Behn which has often been discussed as a text on racism and slavery. This eponymous novel, in the present paper, will be discussed as tale of subjectivity and passion where we would find Oroonoko exercising his own self on various occasions against the English rule and thereby reveal his passion for love and life.

From the very beginning of the text, Behn highlights the kind of people living in Surinam. They were innocent lots, who had their own sets of beliefs. Not that all there believes were appropriate but whatever they believed in, they followed. Oroonoko too was one such character. Behn writes:

And these People represented to me an absolute *Idea* of the first State of Innocence, before Man knew how to sin: And 'tis most evident and plain, that simple Nature is the most harmless, inoffensive and virtuous Mistress. 'Tis she alone, if she were permitted, that better instructs the World, than all the Inventions of Man: Religion would here but destroy that Tranquillity they possess by Ignorance; and Laws would but teach 'em to know Offences, of which now they have no Notion. (77)

His passion towards life and its principles was such that, like a true Surinamian, honesty and integrity were regarded vey highly by him. After he met Imoinda, he was completely convinced that she is going to be the only woman in her life. He too relied on the 'eternal idea' of beauty of soul over physical beauty. This speaks volumes about Oroonoko. He was passionate about his love as well. Unlike the English men, he was a loyal partner to his beloved , Imoinda. Behn distinctly brings this idea as:

But *Oroonoko* was none of those Professors; but as he had right Notions of Honour, so he made her such Propositions as were not only and barely such; but, contrary to the Custom of his Country, he made her Vows, she should be the only Woman he would possess while he liv'd; that no Age or Wrinkles should incline him to change: for her Soul would be always fine, and always young; and he should have an eternal *Idea* in his Mind of the Charms she now bore; and should look into his Heart for that *Idea*, when he could find it no longer in her Face. (83)

Oroonoko's subjectivity is best revealed when he talks about the inerent greatness in men. He is of the opinion that it is not titles that actually make men bave and courageous. Birth too does not play a role in bestowing one with generosity. Only one's own conduct can determine these

qualities in a person. Fortune does make things easy but that is not the determining factor alone. He is also equally vocal when it comes to raise questions on slavery. He clearly points it out to his friends and followers that the Englishmen have not defeated them in any battle and hence they cannot claim to rule over these people. Later Oroonoko is tricked into slavery. His name changes to Caesar. But his rebellious nature continues and like a true leader, he questions the English rule and says:

And why (*said he*) my dear Friends and Fellow-sufferers, should 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 become their Slaves? This would not anger a noble Heart; this would not animate a Soldier's Soul: No, but we are bought and sold like Apes or Monkeys, to be the Sport of Women, Fools and Cowards; and the Support of Rogues and Runagades, that have abandoned their own Countries for Rapine, Murders, Theft and Villanies. Do you not hear every Day how they upbraid each other with Infamy of Life, below the wildest Salvages? And shall we render Obedience to such a degenerate Race, who have no one human Virtue left, to distinguish them from the vilest Creatures? Will you, I say, suffer the Lash from such Hands?' *They all reply'd with one Accord*, 'No, No, No; *Cæsar* has spoke like a great Captain, like a great King.' (126)

As Caesar also, he did not give up his principles. He was not at all convinced with the theory of white supremacy. Even though some of customs and practices of the Africans were flawed, yet they were far better than the English men who were completely untrustworthy. He could easily sense the problems and issues in the 'Principles' of the English men. His distrust in the English men was upto such an extent that with mutual agreement, he kills his lady love Imoinda by his own hand. It so happens that after Imoinda is stolen away by the king and grandfather of Oroonoko, he loses all hopes of uniting with her. Incidentally, he happens to meet her later in the text but they both together decide that Imoinda should die so that he can revenge his loss of honour and reputation and save her from future mishaps. His own experience helps him understand that,

... there was no Faith in the White men, or the Gods they ador'd; who instructed them in Principles so false, that honest Men could not live amongst them; though no People profess'd so much, none perform'd so little: That he knew what he had to do when he dealt with Men of Honour; but with them a Man ought to be eternally on his Guard, and never to eat and drink with Christians, without his Weapon of Defence in his Hand; and, for his own Security, never to credit one Word they spoke. (130)

Though the text has a tragic ending, where both our male and female protagonist die a painful death yet the journey they undergo, leaves the readers in awe. Caesar is hanged at the end of the story so as to teach the rest of the 'negroes' a lesson for life, to threaten them to accept the colonizers without questioning. Aphra Behn takes the charge to penning down the story of such a 'glorious name' (140) and thereby make him immortal. Even though he was most severely punished for his rebelliousness, yet he will always be known for his exercise of subjectivity and his passion towards love and life.

But calling these special Rulers of the Nation together, and requiring their Counsel in this weighty Affair, they all concluded, that (damn 'em) it might be their own Cases; and that *Cæsar* ought to be made an Example to all the *Negroes*, to fright 'em from daring to threaten their Betters, their Lords and Masters; and at this Rate no Man was safe from his own Slaves; and concluded, *nemine contradicente*, That *Cæsar* should be hanged. (134)

To talk of the narrative structure of this novella, the text begins with a dedicatory note to Lord Maitland. Such dedications were very common in those times where writers, in order to win favours or patronage would dedicate their works to a ruler of that time. Behn makes sure to clarify that her dedication to Lord Maitland is coming out his merits and not out of flattery. She begins this text as:

My Lord,

Since the World is grown so Nice and Critical upon Dedications, and will Needs be Judging the Book by the Wit of the Patron; we ought, with a great deal of Circumspection to choose a Person against whom there can be no Exception; and whose Wit and Worth truly Merits all that one is capable of saying upon that Occasion. (73)

The subtitle of Oroonoko is The Royal Slave. This oxymoronic subtitle paints Oroonoko as both a royal parsonage of Surinam as well as a slave to the English colonizers. It is during one of the journeys taken by Behn that she encounters with him and pens down his history. The narration has therefore been done in the first person account, with Behn directly coming into the scene to share her own perspectives with the readers. The dedicatory note also mentions:

The Royal Slave I had the Honour to know in my Travels to the other World; and though I had none above me in that Country yet I wanted power to preserve this Great Man. If there be anything that seems Romantick I beseech your Lordship to consider these Countries do, in all things, so far differ from ours that they produce unconceivable Wonders, at least, so they appear to us, because New and Strange. (74)

Behn's often read text till date has been Oroonoko. Critics and scholars have written widely on it. This novella makes us feel as if Behn is eternally connected to the sufferings of this African prince. She has been a close observer and ardent sympathizer in this case. Jane Spencer in *Aphra Behn's Afterlife* (2000) writes:

Oroonoko himself tells the romantic story of his Coramantien life to the narrator, who meets him in Surinam. She relates the rest of the story, including the treachery of the white colonists, the diverting 'adventures' in the jungle, Oroonoko's doomed slave rebellion, his killing of Imoinda to prevent her falling into the hands of his enemies, and his cruel and grotesque execution. (141)

From the beginning of the novel, Oroonoko possesses a typical characteristic that surpasses any other character in the novel. Even while he is subjected to such cruel death, he never loses his composure and dignity. His physical appearance and his leadership skills complement each other. He is respected as a decisive leader among his people, which is especially seen when he and his people are captured into slavery and the other slaves refuse to eat while Oroonoko is chained which shows their collective conscience. This is one of Behn's tale to be remembered.

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