

Portrayal of African Women in British Fictions: Postcolonial Reading of *Oroonoko*, *King Solomon's Mines* and *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract

The portrayal of Black African woman in British fictions suggests ambivalent attitude of White Europeans towards Black African women and the continent of unknown Africa. Imoinda, the beautiful Black heroine of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, attracts White European colonizers due to her extraordinary beauty and graceful modesty. But Behn's fiction depicted her only as a beautiful possession of either the African old king or Oroonoko or White European colonizers. Foulata, the beautiful Black African heroine of Sir H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* similarly attracts Captain Goods – the White European explorer's attention. But her death in order to protect the White Europeans saves the fiction from accepting the romance between a Black woman and White man. The nameless beautiful Black African woman in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* attracts not only Mr. Kurtz but also Marlowe and other European invaders. But she was held responsible for Kurtz's digression from civilization to savagery.

Keywords : African Black woman, White European man, postcolonial, patriarchy, 'Other',

Postcolonial theory is widely used in examining a variety of colonial relationship beyond the classic colonizing activities of the British Empire. European domination of the New World began in the late fifteenth century. Spain, France, England, Portugal and the Netherlands were the main contenders for the plunder of natural and human resources, and over the next few centuries European empires extended themselves around the globe. During the nineteenth century Britain emerged as the largest imperial power, and by the turn of the twentieth century the British Empire ruled one quarter of the earth's surface, including India, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Ireland, the West Indies, South America, the Middle East, Southeast Asia and significant parts in Africa. British colonial domination continued until the end of World War II. Colonialist ideology often referred to as colonialist discourse was based

on the colonizers' assumption of their own superiority, which they contrasted with the alleged inferiority of native (indigenous) peoples, the original inhabitants of the lands they invaded. The colonizers saw themselves at the centre of the world; the embodiment of what a human being should be, the proper 'self' and so the native peoples were considered 'other', different, savage. The "savage" is usually considered evil as well as inferior (the *demonic other*). But sometimes the "savage" is perceived as possessing a 'primitive' beauty or nobility having closeness to nature (the *exotic other*). However, the image of black woman in British imperial literature is conditioned by the colonizer's patriarchal values. Being part of two marginalized groups historically deemed inferior, black females figured in a distinctively way different from either black man or white woman. They were ascribed derogatory images that were the legacy of a long-lived racism and sexism. Women belonging to colonized countries are the victims of both colonialist and patriarchal ideologies. Colonialist ideology devalues them because of their race and cultural ancestry and patriarchal ideology devalues them because of their gender. Unfortunately, postcolonial women have suffered patriarchal oppression not only at the hands of colonialists, but within their own patriarchal cultures as well.

Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko: or The Royal Slave*, was published in 1688, in London. Behn's fiction not only suggests new trends in British literature like origin of the new genre of novel, the cultivation of sensibility, the emergence of women writers but also it indicates the growth of empire and interest in non-European 'others'. *Oroonoko* deals with the romantic tale of Oroonoko and Imoinda, couple belonging to South African royal lineage, who were sold to British colonists in Surinam. Behn, in her novel, introduces the first stage of colonialism and slave trade, when European travellers and slave-traders only focussed on the narrow strip of African coastline. During the nineteenth century, the real exploration of Africa began with the Protestant missionaries, who visited new regions and obtained geographical knowledge and information about the indigenous people. In 1885, H. Rider Haggard's adventure novel *King Solomon's Mines* was published in London, introducing the new literary genre of the 'Lost World'. This novel centres round a quest for King Solomon's lost mines in an unexplored region of Africa by a group of adventurers led by Allan Quatermain. Their safe return became possible due to the help of Ignosi, a young African king and Foulata, a beautiful African maiden. European fascination for the unexplored Africa made this novel very popular. But the effect of unexplored Africa on European psyche is

prominently suggested in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which was published in 1899. The depiction of the voyage of Charles Marlowe by the Congo River to an ivory station in the Congo Free State, ambiguous image of the ivory trader Kurtz and his relationship with the beautiful African woman suggest ambivalent attitude of the European colonizers towards the colonized Africa and African black woman.

Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* invited readers to examine its treatment of slavery and of racial or cultural 'others'. She introduced a hero and heroine who are African slaves, working in the South American plantation colony in Surinam. During Aphra Behn's time, England actively entered in the slave trade, due to the needs of the planters in Barbados, Surinam and Jamaica. After his accession in 1660, Charles II established a new company to run the African trade with his brother, the Duke of York (later James II), as governor and chief shareholder. The first two ships sent out for slaves to the Gold coast, called Guinea, were named as 'Charles' and 'James'. King Charles named the coins made from the Guinea gold as 'Guineas', in order to honour the company and for the use of its trade. Africa became a secure source of cheap labour for the British plantation colonies. As European labourers were expensive to transport and could not be lured in sufficient numbers, Africans were carried as slaves to the Western hemisphere. Since rank was no bar to enslavement, traders often carried highborn African persons. African women were also carried to the plantation colonies. Imoinda, the beautiful African heroine in *Oroonoko*, was carried to the South American plantation colony in Surinam. But her deplorable status as a slave is the result of patriarchal domination. She was in love with the African prince Oroonoko; but the old African king, who was the grandfather of Oroonoko, heard about her charming beauty and sent a royal veil in order to invite Imoinda to his royal court. The unwilling Imoinda became the victim of patriarchal subjugation because her disobedience to the old king might lead to the death of Oroonoko. But soon she was reunited with Oroonoko with the help of another African woman Onahal, one of the mistresses of the old king. They consummated their marriage, but unfortunately the old king discovered the affair. According to the patriarchal norms, the affair was considered as a transgression by Oroonoko and the old king considered Imoinda as a 'polluted thing' and so he decided to sell her as a slave to any Christian or heathen country. Thus Imoinda was secretly sold as an African slave to British colonizers. The king never

disclosed this to Oroonoko; rather he told him that Imoinda was secretly killed. Thus Imoinda was considered by her own culture as a mere possession, whose virginity and chastity defined her value. Later Imoinda began a new life as Clemene, a baptized Christian slave in the South American plantation colony of Surinam. She was considered as the most beautiful and virtuous black woman not only by black slaves but also by her white Christian masters. Trefry, a Cornish man, who was the purchaser of Oroonoko, was also enamoured by Imoinda:

“Trefry, . . . proceeded to tell him, they had the most charming Black that ever was beheld on their Plantation, about Fifteen or Sixteen Years old, as he guess’d; that, for his part, he had done nothing but Sigh for her ever since she came; and all that white Beautys he had seen, never charm’d him so absolutely as this fine Creature had done; and that no Man of any Nation, ever beheld her, that did not fall in Love with her; and that she had all the Slaves perpetually at her Feet; and the whole Country resounded with the Fame of Clemene. She is adorn’d with the most Graceful Modesty that ever beautified Youth.”

In fact, Trefry could not subjugate Imoinda with strength and force due to her modesty and weeping. Thus, Behn’s fiction clearly indicates ambivalent attitude of white Europeans towards African black women.

Oroonoko was also baptized by his Christian masters and he was given a new name ‘Caesar’. The two lovers were reunited at Surinam and began to live as husband and wife in their own slave cottage. When Imoinda became pregnant, Oroonoko gave petition to return to their homeland. After hearing vague promises of the governor’s arrival, Oroonoko organized a slave revolt. Imoinda, along with other slaves fought valiantly. But they had to surrender and Oroonoko and his companion Tuscan were whipped. Oroonoko decided to avenge this dishonour but he was aware of the consequences. He decided to kill Imoinda in order to protect her from rape and subjugation by the colonizers. Imoinda’s heroic nature was revealed as she willingly agreed to die in the hands of her loving husband. Later Oroonoko was also killed by the colonizers.

Imoinda's fate was intertwined with Oroonoko. She was forced to become an unwilling mistress to an old king, a slave of the White masters in a foreign land and ultimately experienced violent death in order to save her honour and chastity. Although, she had heroic potentials, her life was always affected by the actions of others due to patriarchal norms and racial condition.

H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* depicted another African woman Foulata, who played an important role in the main plot of this adventure novel. It was Foulata, who captured the heart of Captain Good, one of the companions of Allan Quatermain. Foulata was a beautiful African woman belonging to the African region of Kukuanaaland, who became another victim of her own patriarchal society. She was one of the beautiful maidens, who were compelled to sacrifice their life at the night of the lunar eclipse, according to the order of the king Twala. Allan Quatermain was tricked by the king Twala to choose the most beautiful girl among those maidens. He chose Foulata and she was chosen as the first victim for the sacrifice. Though Foulata did not lose hope and she asked for help to Captain Good, who assured her of protection. Sir Henry killed Scragga in order to protect Foulata from his assault. This act was one of the turning points of the novel as people of the king Twala considered it as an intrusion into their rites. The civil war began between the usurper king Twala and the rightful young prince Ignosi. Later Ignosi along with the European adventurers defeated the opponent king and his followers. The European adventurers decided to go to in search of king Solomon's mines with Foulata and Gagool. Gagool was an old African woman, a companion of the king Twala and considered as the 'wise old woman' by the people of Kukuanaaland. She maintained her power among people by means of inciting terror. She declared people as witch who opposed king Twala's rule. Although she was compelled to led Allan Quatermain and his companions to the mines of the king Solomon's, she tried to capture them within the chamber by sealing the door. But Foulata found her treachery and prevent her from doing any other harm. Gagool was crushed beneath the stone door but she managed to stab Foulata. Foulata died from the fatal wound and those European adventurers were saved eventually. Ignosi, the present king of the Kukuanaaland helped them to return to their home.

The character of Foulata played a crucial role in this novel. She was introduced in the plot as a would-be sacrificer and finally she sacrificed herself. But there is a difference in her previous and present sacrifice; finally she sacrificed herself for the European adventurers, not for her native superstitious rituals. And she sacrificed herself in order to save her lover Captain Good. Her death was necessary for the plot as her marriage to Captain Good would not be accepted in European society. An interracial romance between Foulata and Captain Good was accepted by racist patriarchal European psyche, but an interracial marriage between a Black woman and White man was too difficult to comprehend. Thus, Foulata was portrayed as a beautiful and caring black woman, the lover of a White European man and the Black woman who sacrificed herself for greater good.

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is one of the crucial texts for understanding of postcolonialism. The novel not only raises problematic questions against imperialism and racism, but also it suggests ambivalent attitude of White European psyche towards the 'savage' continent of Black Africa. Charles Marlowe, the captain of the steamboat for an ivory trading company, narrated his experiences in the Congo River in Africa to his fellow sailors on the boat, anchored on the river Thames. He told them about Mr. Kurtz, who was in charge of a very important trading post in the free African state of Congo. He told him how he had met Mr. Kurtz after arriving at the Inner Station. Marlowe had heard and seen his various acts of brutality over the native African people. But after arriving at the Inner Station, they had found Kurtz severely ill and they had to take him to the steamer on a stretcher. On that moment, Marlowe had seen an African woman, who appeared on the shore and had been staring at the steamer. She was extraordinarily beautiful; who wore ornaments made by elephant tusk and was pacing on the shore. According to the Russian trader, the Black woman had a relationship with Kurtz and Kurtz was so possessive that he had tried to shoot her if she had tried to come abroad. This clearly suggests ambivalent attitude of this fiction towards Africa. The title of 'mistress' was never given to the African woman, although it was suggested that Kurtz had sexual relationship with her. Neither the Russian nor the manager would want to comprehend about the romance between a European white man and an African Black woman. They did not accept the romance between a black woman and white man. The African woman actually symbolizes Africa, her nation. Her extraordinary beauty indicates the

exotic charm and fascination of Africa. Her character is stereotyped in this novel, as she is portrayed only as a symbol, as a beautiful possession. Infact, she did not utter any word. The reader only can assume about her action. Her thoughts are not revealed to the narrators and to the readers. Thus, she is portrayed as the unknown Africa, who fascinates the European psyche, but remains still an unknown continent of unknown people, languages and cultures. Her character is contrasted with Kurtz's fiancé. Kurtz's fiancé was still mourning for Kurtz's even after a year of his death. She is undoubtedly beautiful and praised for her capacity for fidelity and suffering. Her submissive image is well accepted by the European patriarchal psyche. Infact, Marlowe lied to her that Kurtz's last word was her name. But Kurtz's last word was "The Horror!" His fiancé readily believed Marlowe's story because she had expected it. Marlowe's untimely death saves the fiction from choosing between the African Black 'mistress' and White European fiancé of Mr. Kurtz. Thus, European patriarchal, racist psyche was saved from this problematic situation.

Therefore, it is suggested that racist European psyche not only despises these 'other' women, but also is fascinated by that very 'otherness'. Actually these three women- Imoinda in *Oroonoko*, Foulata in *King Solomon's Mines* and the unnamed African woman in *Heart of Darkness*, are portrayed as the 'femme fatale'. This term borrowed from archetypal criticism signifies narrative heroines, who bring catastrophic events. Oroonoko's rebellion was for the freedom of Imoinda and their unborn child. It was Foulata for whom the civil war had begun in the Kukuanalnd. According to the Russian trader, Kurtz's transgression from the 'civilized' society to 'savagery' was due to the influence of this beautiful African woman. European patriarchal colonialist society always blamed colonized native woman for any disastrous events. Bur Oroonoko himself and the colonizers were responsible for his plight. The civil war in Kukuanalnd was necessary for Ignosi's rightful claim to the royal throne. Kurtz's own brutality was responsible for his deplorable condition and death. Those Black women's lives were affected by the patriarchal norms of their own society and by the actions of European colonizers. Still, the racist European psyche could not ignore these native women. None of these three women were blessed with happy reunion with their lovers, nor were they completely hated by the racist European minds.

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