



Hierarchies Of Culture: Revealing The Veneer Of European Hypocrisy In Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*

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Abstract: The Restoration era, witnessed an ephemeral burst of colonial expansion, notably England which expedited networking and established trading posts in Africa and America. This period has observed the ascendance of The Atlantic Slave Trade, a system ratified by exhortations to Enlightenment, Christianity, economic exigency. European sovereign states habitually depicted themselves as moral elites and cultural overlords, explicating the colonial project as a magnanimous undertaking to elevate colonial existence. Nonetheless, literature of the restored court is occasionally fraught with complexities. Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688) is a tapestry of contradictions of hegemonic ideology. Aphra Behn was a writer and a Royalist spy who was politically involved but in *Oroonoko* she expresses her condemnation of ruthless subjugation and hypocrisy.

The narrative concerns the life of Oroonoko, an African prince who is branded with the iron of colonial oppression in Surinam. Behn idealizes Oroonoko's character and uses the narrative to deconstruct the veneer of European imperial righteousness. Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688) is a revolutionary work of anti-slavery literature. Occurring in the milieu of the Age of Imperialism, the novel chronicles the tragic story of a man of noble lineage subjected to enslavement. While Behn's characterization of Oroonoko elicits compassion and reverence, the text also serves as a vehicle for social commentary. The writer unveils the insidious hypocrisy of European colonists who claimed to expand in the name of a civilized society.

This research paper situates *Oroonoko* within its sociohistorical and intertextual landscape to examine Behn's deconstruction of European double standards through narrative irony, character contrast and structural reversal. This action, therefore, augments scholarly engagement with pre-modern critiques of imperial expansion and role of literature in deconstructing and reconstructing imperial narratives.

Keywords: Aphra Behn, Oroonoko, European colonialism, colonial hypocrisy, Restoration literature, anti-colonial critique

Introduction: Aphra Behn portrays Oroonoko as the personification of cardinal virtues, thereby disrupting the colonial dichotomy of “civilized European” vs. “savage African”. From the outset, she characterizes him as having “a native grandeur.... that struck an awe and reverence” (Behn 13). His demeanor is consistently magnanimous, particularly as opposed to the duplicitous colonizers.

Behn writes, “He was as capable even of reigning well, and of governing as wisely.... as any prince civilized by the most refined education” (Behn 14). This counter-narrative dismantles coloniality’s claims of historical and cultural supremacy. Oroonoko possesses innate wisdom. He has already transcended his subjugators beyond their current moral and intellectual stature. In juxtaposition to Oroonoko, European figures such as Governor Byam are distinguished by dissimulation and pusillanimity, Byam frequently breaks promises and employs stratagems to exploit Oroonoko. For example, when Oroonoko is taken into custody, the narrator comments that “they sent him promises and vows of safety” (Behn 59), only to subject him to flagellation, maiming and followed by immediate execution. This debunks the moralizing facade of colonial rule, particularly the assertion that Europeans established a framework of ethical conduct and social order in the newly encountered territory.

Language in *Oroonoko* is used as a primary tool for deception. The colonists deliberately employ promises as a deceptive tactic, demonstrating how colonial power functions through rhetorical deception. One of the most pivotal acts of treachery follows after Oroonoko’s surrender. He has faith in the integrity of the English character. He says, “I am not afraid of dying...but cannot bear to be whipped. My honor will not suffer it” (Behn 61). Notwithstanding his plea, he is subjected to torment and disgrace. The depravity stems from prevarication.

Behn illustrates that the Europeans deliberate strategy of using language to establish dominance masks cruelty with false civility. These acts of perfidy starkly oppose to the principles of integrity and honor associated with Oroonoko, illuminating the divide between European discourse and colonial reality.

Behn’s writing also displays a preoccupation with faith and finitude, ostensibly on the basis of the colonialist assertion of Christian values. However, these values are depleted of meaning in the face of their merciless abuse of Oroonoko and other slaves. The colonists’ use of ecclesiastical language is subverted by their conduct.

Oroonoko’s final death scene echoes Christian martyrdom: “he smiled with a noble disdain, as if he scorned their barbarity” (Behn 63). His unyielding fortitude directly points to the steadfast and persistent nature of Christ’s endurance and uses Christian framework’s own moral principles to expose hypocrisy within the group. Behn deploys religious symbolism for polemical purposes to show ideological hijacking of faith. The fact that a non-European character personifies Christian virtues more authentically than the colonists suggests a gradual eroding of the ethical foundation of colonialism.

Aphra Behn portrays the narrator of *Oroonoko* as enigmatic who, on one hand, holds Oroonoko in high regard and shows respect towards him and, on the other hand, silently or passively participates in the imperial framework that destroys him. This narrator acts as an author surrogate for Behn and is situated on the threshold. She offers commiseration for Oroonoko’s suffering while demonstrating duplicity in her actions.

For example, the narrator refers to Oroonoko as “this great man”, whose virtues are “as admirable as his misfortunes were deplorable”. (Behn 50). She extols his valor and intellectual integrity, particularly in comparison to the colonists around her. Even after witnessing his perfidious demise, she abstains from interventions and offers no protection to him. Instead, she perseveres among the colonists and narrates events with a degree of emotional distance.

This discrepancy between the outward expression and actual behavior suggest a passive acceptance of wrongdoing, and subtly criticizes European moral passivity. The narrator’s tone conveys a broader moral exceptionalism without resisting injustice which highlights the European’s deceptive and dishonest nature of hypocrisy that Behn exposes.

The narrator’s voice is unreliable. It encapsulates the paradoxical nature of imperial dominion, lamenting the repercussions of empire while still relying on and leveraging its framework. Her failure to challenge the violence around her underlines the novel’s dominant motif that highlight the two-faced nature of European actions. They presented themselves as bringing civilization but engaged in brutal exploitation and oppression.

Theoretical insights from Laura Brown and Janet Todd on sentiment and ambivalence in *Oroonoko*

Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* is a cornerstone of early English literary history, often celebrated as a pioneering work and captures the essence of a racialized empire. While it is a deeply moving and empathetic portrayal of an African prince subjected to disavowal by the colonial powers, a contentious issue has long occupied scholars who have questioned whether it elevates the marginalized or seeks to dismantle the colonial structures and ideologies. The core contention revolves around the paradox of European conduct, particularly the hypocrisy of colonial ethics- between their outward display of piety while engaging in harmful practices. Two major scholars, Laura Brown and Janet Todd, provide essential framework for interpreting Behn’s narrative as a critique of this hypocrisy.

In *Ends of Empire: Women and Ideology in Early Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (1993), Laura Brown maintains that the text embodies a dialectic of colonial discourse: it is not simply a straightforward account of suffering but a deliberate construction where the sentimental and the brutal are interwoven. According to Brown, Behn imbues the character of Oroonoko with tragic grandeur to appeal to the reader’s emotional sensibilities; but despite the presence of a nascent emotional framework, the structures of imperialist ideology remain largely unaddressed and unchallenged.

Brown observes:

“The discourse of sentiment in *Oroonoko* both enables and exposes the ideologies of empire. Behn creates a protagonist who evokes admiration and pity, but whose death serves to underlie the collapse of moral authority in colonial society” (Brown, *Ends of Empire*, p.48)

This insight is corroborated through Behn's own narrative description of Oroonoko, whom she compares to classical heroes: "He was a great man, worthy of a better fate; a prince of power and virtue...whom misfortune had placed among men unworthy of his presence" (*Oroonoko*, p.50, Penguin Classics)

Her argument substantiates the claim that Behn employs Oroonoko's noble character to reveal the insincerity of the Europeans. They profess politeness and superiority, but are revealed to be atrocious. The novel transcends mere personal revelation; it undermines the established order and its supporting ideology.

In *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn* (1996), Janet Todd explores the multifaceted nature of Behn's situated identity, her position both as a devoted Royalist and a female writer critiquing colonial power structures. Todd asserts that while Behn adheres to established norms and power structures in many of her works, *Oroonoko* conveys a strong sense of anger and disappointment at the behavior of British colonists and presents a sympathetic heroic image of African resistance.

Todd writes:

"Behn's Royalist and hierarchical instincts may have led her to admire the princely Oroonoko, but the savagery of the Europeans-disguised by their claims to Christianity and law – clearly disturbed her") The *Secret Life of Aphra Behn*, p.214).

This conforms to Behn's severe portrayal of Governor Byam and other colonists who use their political and religious authority to hide their treachery. For example, Behn observes that Byam beguiles Oroonoko with assurance of safety.

"They sent him promises and vows of safety; which he, with a generous scorn, refused to believe" (*Oroonoko*, p.59).

Todd's astute observation suggests that Behn remains unfettered by ideological constraints. She leverages her narrative to underscore the failure of European ideals such as integrity and Christian virtue, when evaluated in colonial contexts. Behn may not averse to revolutionary action, but compels the reader to confront the reality that the "civilized" European exhibits barbarous tendencies.

Together, Laura Brown and Janet Todd articulate *Oroonoko* as a text entrenched in its historical moment, yet denounces the brutality of the empire. Brown reveals how Behn uses irony by employing sentimental language to expose colonial contradictions, while Todd emphasizes the moral chasm between imperial power and indigenous suffering.

In spite of their insights, existing criticism often engages with hypocrisy as a side effect of empire, rather than as a primary literary emphasis and dominant motif. This research paper seeks to address that gap by placing European hypocrisy's breach of promise manifested as a tangible betrayal at the core of Behn's narrative strategy.

While *Oroonoko* has been the subject of rigorous and diverse scholarly inquiry, several significant gaps remain in the existing scholarship. Particularly, the narrative's central critique pivots on the duplicity inherent in Europe's self-proclaimed moral superiority, a duplicity manifest in its actions that contradict its espoused ideals. This research paper has endeavored to elevate that theme, but further exploration is needed. The extant body of scholarship, such as the works of Laura Brown and Catherine Gallagher generally addresses European hypocrisy as civilizing mission hypocrisy. However, these studies often treat hypocrisy as a side-effect, not as an architectonic. Behn employs to dismantle imperial claims. A limited but discerning group of researchers has exhaustively explored hypocrisy as a structuring principle that links character, theme, plot and irony in *Oroonoko*. Further research can study how Behn uses hypocrisy structurally: in narrative voice, character arcs and genre expectations to destabilize imperial rationale.

While critics recognize the narrator's emotional disengagement and measured involvement, the narrative lacks meticulous exposition of the narrator's perspective. The narrator herself may serve as an ironic representation of Restoration-era moral spectatorship.

The narrative voice is frequently interpreted as Behn's voice or a neutral observer. Notwithstanding her moral cognizance, her inaction may be construed as an indictment of readers who feel sympathy without offering resistance. Future investigations can explore the narrator as a didactic figure, drawing comparisons with other Restoration texts where narrative voices engage with the audience on multiple levels.

While *Oroonoko* captures a tragic-romance-esque journey, few studies explore how Behn deconstructively employs these genres. *Oroonoko*, an enslaved African, ascends to the role of a tragic protagonist, critiquing the colonial assumption that virtue and ethics belong to Europeans.

The role of deconstructive subversion in critiquing empire is unexplored. Future research can critically examine how Behn's subversion of genre conventions highlights the ethical failings of colonial narratives.

By highlighting the double standards as a deliberate authorial choice, scholars can more fully appreciate *Oroonoko* as a seminal work of imperial critique.

Conclusion

Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* stands as a progenitor of profound literary inquest of the epistemological dissonance in European colonialism. Through its depiction of an African prince who is a person of high moral fiber than his seemingly enlightened subjugators, the novel exposes the profound duplicity of imperial ideology.

This research paper has shown that European hypocrisy as a thematic linchpin in the novel. Behn deploys a variety of literary techniques, from irony and inversion to a morally ambivalent narrator to debunk the sanctimony claimed by the colonial project. Thereby, she not only challenges the foundations of empire, prompting readers to scrutinize its perceived legitimacy but also epitomizes the societal renaissance, challenging it to confront the gap between its ethos and conduct.

By unmasking the duplicity across religion, political and personal domains, this study contributes to the field by addressing a significant lacuna in the existing literature of *Oroonoko*. Future research may continue to build on this work by exploring how Behn's narrative techniques, particularly her masterful employment of distinctive narrative approach, serve as a harbinger of postcolonial satire. Ultimately, *Oroonoko* remains a venerated text for deciphering the complexities of how early modern literary texts could scrutinize the prevailing belief systems of its era, elucidating perspectives on the 17th century imperial landscape simultaneously with perennial duplicity.

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