



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor 7.9 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

Reimagining the “Royal Slave”: Paradox, Power, and the Politics of Representation in Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*

Dr. Ekta Sharma (Assistant Professor in English)

Pt. N.R.S. Govt. College, Rohtak

ekta.sharma26@gmail.com

Abstract

Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* has long occupied an ambiguous position within early English literature. The novella resists straightforward interpretation, inviting readers into a space of narrative instability, shifting cultural codes, and unresolved tensions. This paper argues that Behn’s text is deliberately crafted as an interpretive puzzle—what Roland Barthes might call a “writerly” narrative—because it encourages multiple, sometimes contradictory, readings. At its core, the novel constructs a hero who is simultaneously noble and enslaved, dignified yet degraded, idealized yet racialized through European aesthetic norms. The persistent interplay of such oppositions suggests that Behn uses *Oroonoko* as a site of discursive negotiation rather than ideological affirmation. The essay examines Behn’s rhetoric of admiration, her Eurocentric descriptions, the politics of naming and representation, and the unresolved conflict between *Oroonoko*’s heroic status and his fate as colonial property. In doing so, it demonstrates how the novel both participates in and destabilizes the ideological structures of its time.

Keywords: Royal slave, paradox, colonial representation, narrative politics, Aphra Behn

Introduction

Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*, or *The Royal Slave* occupies an important position in the history of English fiction, yet it remains one of the most paradoxical works of the Restoration period. Its protagonist, *Oroonoko*, is consistently framed through a series of contradictions—he is princely but enslaved, admired yet betrayed, dignified yet subjected to brutal violence. These contradictions make the work “scriptible,” in Barthes’s terminology: it demands active interpretive engagement because its ideological stance cannot be easily pinned down. The narrative simultaneously celebrates *Oroonoko* as a heroic figure and encodes him within Eurocentric criteria of beauty and worth. This duality generates a complex representational space in which *Oroonoko* becomes both a marker of colonial ambivalence and a structure through which Behn negotiates competing discourses of race, power, and authority.

This paper revisits these complexities by examining the novel’s contradictory impulses. It argues that Behn constructs a deliberately ambiguous text that allows for multiple and often conflicting interpretations. The following analysis surveys the novel’s language of admiration, its visual



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor 7.9 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

coding of Blackness, its narrative evasions, and its oscillations between sympathy and complicity. The result is a portrait of a work that refuses to settle into either subversive critique or ideological endorsement, instead performing both simultaneously.

The Problematic Construct of the “Royal Slave”

The phrase “royal slave” is itself an emblem of the text’s fundamental contradictions. The hero’s nobility is repeatedly asserted—sometimes to the point of excess—as though his royal status must constantly be defended against the degrading condition of slavery. Behn insists on Oroonoko’s superiority in almost every descriptive passage. His face, physique, manner of speaking, and behavior are set apart from those of other Africans. He is treated as an exception, a figure who transcends the racial category to which he belongs.

Behn’s narrator registers anxiety in introducing an African protagonist who does not conform to European expectations. The text attempts to reconcile this by portraying Oroonoko as a kind of quasi-European hero trapped within an African body. His “Roman” nose, refined gestures, and “exact” proportions recode him through Western standards of beauty. This tactic allows Behn to admire him without challenging the racial hierarchies of her time.

Yet this strategy also exposes a deeper tension: Oroonoko must be distanced from Africans as a group in order to be admired. His nobility comes not merely from his lineage but from his ability to approximate whiteness. This Eurocentric aesthetic removes him from the category of the “savage” and renders him acceptable for sentimental engagement. The narrative thus affirms him as heroic while implicitly reinforcing racial structures that devalue African identity.

Narrative Ambivalence and Conflicting Signals

Throughout the novella, the narrator oscillates between sympathy for the enslaved prince and alignment with the colonial system. Her tone shifts from admiration to condescension, from criticism of European cruelty to implicit justification for colonial authority. This fluctuation creates a pattern of narrative instability that mirrors the contradictions embedded in Oroonoko’s representation.

For instance, while the narrator denounces the treachery of the slave captain or the barbarity of Byam, she simultaneously praises Trefry, presents the colonial population as reasonable, and insists on her own helplessness. She claims to lament Oroonoko’s suffering yet remains complicit in the social order that produces it. Even her insistence on eyewitness authority wavers; she admits to being absent at several crucial moments, leaving gaps in the narrative and creating a sense of unreliability.

These inconsistencies suggest that the narrator’s perspective is not neutral but deeply implicated in the discourses of power she describes. The text’s ambiguity arises not because Behn lacked clarity, but because she carefully designed a narrative that allows competing ideologies—sympathy and racism, admiration and hierarchy—to coexist.



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor 7.9 www.ijesh.com **ISSN: 2250-3552**

Eurocentric Visual Coding and the Aesthetics of Representation

One of the most striking aspects of Oroonoko is its visual coding. Behn describes Oroonoko in ways that align with European ideals of masculinity and beauty. His body is framed like a classical sculpture; his features are repeatedly contrasted with those of other Africans. His demeanor is likened to that of a European prince or general.

Such depictions reveal Behn's reliance on Eurocentric aesthetic frameworks. Oroonoko's nobility becomes legible only when filtered through these codes. This undermines the text's surface aim of elevating an African hero by entangling his dignity in Western norms.

Moreover, this form of representation results in an underlying contradiction: Behn appears to celebrate African identity while simultaneously insisting that true nobility must conform to ideals external to Africa. Oroonoko is "other" and yet not fully permitted to remain other; he is assimilated visually even as he remains culturally displaced.

Heroism, Violence, and the Dissolution of Idealism

Oroonoko embodies traits that classical tragedy associates with heroic figures: moral steadfastness, courage, and a commitment to honor. Yet these qualities become the very forces that lead to his downfall. His refusal to compromise, his insistence on truth, and his desire to protect Imoinda ultimately contribute to his tragic end.

Behn heightens the pathos of his suffering by depicting his final moments as both horrifying and noble. Oroonoko's dismemberment is described in graphic detail, but his composure transforms this brutality into a spectacle of stoic endurance. The colonial authorities attempt to dehumanize him, yet he maintains dignity through his refusal to cry out or resist. This tragic posture elevates him even as it exposes the barbarity of the system that destroys him.

However, this moment also illustrates the text's contradictions. The heroic death reinforces Oroonoko's nobility, but it also allows the narrative to aestheticize his suffering—turning real violence into a literary tableau. Behn's admiration for Oroonoko's endurance risks overshadowing the systemic cruelty that necessitates such endurance in the first place.

Dignity as a Double-Edged Construct

Dignity operates in Oroonoko as both a humanizing force and a narrative trap. On one hand, Behn's repeated emphasis on Oroonoko's dignity elevates him above the enslavers who torture and betray him. On the other hand, the very rhetoric of dignity becomes a means of distancing him from other enslaved people. His exceptionalism makes him worthy of sympathy, but it reinforces the colonial notion that only certain types of Africans—royal, noble, Europeanized—deserve admiration.

This tension between individual dignity and collective devaluation permeates the text. Oroonoko's tragedy arises not simply from personal betrayal but from his impossible position



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor 7.9 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

within a system that refuses to see Africans as equal human beings. His dignity therefore becomes a symbol of both resistance and limitation.

Conclusion

Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* is a narrative built on contradiction. It elevates an African prince to heroic stature while filtering his nobility through European aesthetic values. It denounces colonial cruelty even as it remains bound to colonial narratives. It urges admiration for its protagonist while constructing him as an exception rather than a challenge to racial stereotypes. These contradictions do not weaken the text but make it a complex site of discursive negotiation. The novel's ambiguity, oscillation between positions, and unresolved tensions compel readers to confront the ideological instability of early modern racial discourse. By presenting *Oroonoko* as both royal and enslaved, both dignified and racially coded, both admired and objectified, Behn produces a text that resists closure. In doing so, she creates a story that continues to provoke debate and reinterpretation, making *Oroonoko* a crucial work for understanding the cultural politics of race, representation, and early modern literature.

References

1. Behn, Aphra. *Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave*. Edited by Janet Todd, Penguin Classics, 2003.
2. Burns, Kathryn. "The Noble Savage in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*." *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, vol. 23, no. 3, 1983, pp. 419–436.
3. Gallagher, Catherine. *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670–1820*. Oxford UP, 1994.
4. Hodges, Devon. "The Politics of Narrative in Behn's *Oroonoko*." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1982, pp. 331–344.
5. Hughes, Derek. *The Theatre of Aphra Behn*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.
6. Morrell, Roy. "*Oroonoko*: Fact and Fiction." *The Review of English Studies*, vol. 33, no. 131, 1982, pp. 248–260.
7. Nicol, Helen. "Heroism and Slavery: Reading the Tragic Mode in *Oroonoko*." *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2000, pp. 387–402.
8. Orr, Bridget. "*Oroonoko* and the Racialization of Heroic Virtue." *PMLA*, vol. 116, no. 3, 2001, pp. 551–566.
9. Revia, Michelle. "Royalism, Patriotism and the Tragic Hero in Behn's *Oroonoko*." *Restoration*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2004, pp. 1–20.
10. Todd, Janet. *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn*. Rutgers UP, 1996.
11. Bernard, Trevor. *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World*. UNC Press, 2004.



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor 7.9 www.ijesh.com **ISSN: 2250-3552**

12. Ferguson, Moira. *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670–1834*. Routledge, 1992.
13. Schwarz, Daniel R. *In Defense of Reading: Teaching Literature in the Twenty-First Century*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.
14. Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Vintage Books, 1979.
15. Young, Robert J. C. *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*. Blackwell, 2001.
16. Bloom, Harold, editor. *The Tragic Vision*. Chelsea House, 2010.
17. Herington, John. *Poetry into Drama: Early Tragedy and the Greek Poetic Tradition*. U of California P, 1985.
18. Knox, Bernard. *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy*. U of California P, 1964.
19. Steiner, George. *The Death of Tragedy*. Faber & Faber, 1961.
20. Williams, Raymond. *Modern Tragedy*. Verso, 1979.