



**Colonial Narrative
Strategies in Aphra Behn's
*Oroonoko***

Dr.Hanan Barakat

Western writers' positive representation of the colonized "Other" usually provokes literary inquiries. As such representation often goes against the grain of stereotyped distorted image of the colonized; it is usually considered by critics as controversial, therefore, approached with distrust and apprehension. The present study aims to approaching Aphra Behn's renowned glorification of the African slave Oroonoko. The study targets Behn's choice of novel genre, rather than drama, to narrate the story of her African protagonist. Colonial discourse is approached in relation to the text's dominant first person point of view. In its assessment of the relationship between the narrator and the protagonist, the study engages Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. The study concludes with approaching the issue of the narrator's reliability as to validate Behn's attitude toward Oroonoko.

Oroonoko (1688) by Aphra Behn (1640—89) is the story of an African prince who is abducted by European slave traders and transported to the colony of Surinam. The novella portrays the prince's refusal to accept his slavery and his consequent attempts to escape the colony. Eventually, Oroonoko is caught, and executed with savage cruelty. In approaching *Oroonoko* critics are usually divided into two main camps. One camp sees that Aphra Behn is an English writer who portrays the life of an African prince with typical colonial attitudes, no matter how she glorifies him even to the last scene. This camp is represented by Joseph Ortiz who emphasizes the colonialist



tone of the novella, and sees it as an attempt by the narrator to "combine European and African histories under imperialism" (16). Another critic, Joanna Lipking, believes that Aphra Behn, "writes as a frank and ardent colonialist" (179), and "as a white European, she is inevitably in service to power, colluding with it and constructing it in her writing" (178). The other camp of critics denies racial and postcolonial traits in *Oroonoko*. Derek Hughes is a representative here as he believes that Behn did not experience the traditional European sense of superiority toward other nations and other races. He notices that scientific views on the superiority of one race to another only belong to late eighteenth century. Thus, it is "anachronistic and unfair to import the racist preconceptions of later ages into Behn's fictional world" (204). He repeatedly emphasizes the need to be "very careful to avoid anachronism in interpreting Behn's views of blackness" (218). Lee Morrissey goes further than that and sees the text as "having abolitionist ends" (275). Along these two camps, there are literary critics who see *Oroonoko* as "a figure for Stuart royalty" (Spencer 225), and that he "has been plausibly described as Charles I, James II, or the exiled Duke of York (Carnell 146). Janet Todd also suggests reading *Oroonoko* "in terms of the political situation of the faltering King James" (73).

Aphra Behn wrote in the Restoration when drama was the dominant literary genre. The writer herself is rated as "the first successful woman playwright" (Todd 41), and

"England's first professional female writer" (Morrissey 231). Before writing *Oroonoko* she had already written about fifteen plays. Critics refer to "the narrative" *Oroonoko* as "mark[ing] an abrupt shift from her dramatic work" (Anderson 2), and Rachel K. Carnell relates her shift to novel genre to the era in question.

The traditional patriarchalism of Restoration tragedy...requires that women be subordinate to men and men to God and to their king. It is against this backdrop that Behn turns to the novel to write a different version of Restoration tragedy. . . .
(146)

Carnell refers to Behn's seeking independence in her decision to shift to the genre of novel. This genre allows novelists a larger space of freedom during the process of composition, a privilege which playwrights do not always enjoy.

Drama as a genre differs from the novel as it is a form of "fiction . . . acted in front of audience . . . [it] is . . . immediate . . . and . . . its presentation [is] through actors playing roles" (Frye *et al* 150). In defining drama, a great deal of the emphasis goes to the theatre and the performance of the players, their silences, the chorus, the collaboration between directors and producers...etc. Thus, plays exist "in two ways – on the page, and on the stage"(Thornborrow and Wareing 116). The emphasis here does not go only to the written text but also both to stage and actors' performance.



However, the case is not the same with fiction, generally defined as "extended pieces of narrative" (Cuddon 599). In investigating the novel genre, the focus is on elements such as plot, setting, point of view and theme. An advantage guaranteed by the author of fictional prose narrative is freedom of choice of point of view. In particular, the examination of the element of point of view strongly engages the author's reasons for such a choice. Different types of point of view, instant shift in time and place, as well as from internal to external perspectives, and vice versa, are examples of the freedom the author allowed during the process of writing fiction.

Aphra Behn chose first person point of view to narrate *Oroonoko*. In her introduction, she describes her book as a "history" (1), and the narrative process as "relating the truth" (1). Behn denies any intention to "entertain my reader with the adventures of a feigned hero" (1). Her claim goes against "the cardinal rule for reading fiction ... that the narrating 'I' is not the author, and thus the claims made by the narrating 'I' are not to be taken for the author's claims" (Lanser 207). Further, Behn informs her readers that the natives had "presented" her some of their Surinam customs which she "gave . . . to the King's Theatre, and it was the dress of the *Indian Queen*, infinitely admired by persons of quality; and was inimitable" (2). Critics handle this remark as an attempt "to guarantee the story's veracity by stepping outside the frame of the fiction and evoking a familiar context that is shared by its [*Oroonoko's*] readers .

. . . In this way, elements of the fictional world are brought into continuity with the non-fictional experience of the contemporary reader" (Hammond and Regan 40). Behn manipulates her readers' experience of visiting theatre, and seeing native South American customs worn by actors as to indicate the authenticity of her narrative. These are but some of the examples of her manipulation of first person point of view as to prove that her work is not fictional.

In examining *Oroonoko*, many literary critics categorize it as fictional. Brean Hammond and Shaun Regan see that, "a variety of novelistic and pre-novelistic ingredients can be observed struggling for priority within [*Oroonoko*]" (39). These two critics suggest that the text belongs to the genre of romance. They attribute that to Behn's representation of Oroonoko as "supremely virtuous" and to "the scale of plot coincidence" (39). Indeed, Behn wrote *Oroonoko* at an age when romance--generally defined as "almost any sort of adventure story...a form of entertainment"(Cuddon 803)--was still a prominent literary genre. Further, Walter Allen points out Behn's "attempt to engraft verisimilitude on to a conventional story of romance" (34). Ian Watt also denies the non-fictional nature of the book by pointing out that "early novelists . . . named their characters in such a way as to suggest that they were to be regarded as particular individuals in the contemporary social environment" (20). As a still emerging genre, "[t]his claim to truth is crucial for the early novel" (Morrissey 258). A further denial of Behn's claim to truth is shown in



critics' approach to her detailed actual description of the colony of Surinam, where a great deal of action takes place. Margret Todd suggests the possibility of Behn's borrowing these "descriptions" from "books of marvelous travels which they much resemble" (70). Thus, both character (Oroonoko) and place (Surinam) are scrutinized by critics as to make Behn's claim to authenticity invalid.

On the other hand, there are other critics with views that range from a sheer suggestion of the presence of autobiographical element to an acceptance of the work as an autobiographical. Laura J. Rosenthal belongs to the first party as she suggests "treat[ing] *Oroonoko* as a more self-conscious literary production . . . [as] other elements suggest artistic invention rather than strict autobiography"(156). Rosenthal's suggestion implies a conviction of a clear presence of 'autobiography.' As for Marry Ann O'Donnell, she belongs to the second party as she documents the journey of the writer and her family to Surinam from "all information that could have been derived from *Oroonoko*" (2). Likewise, Jane Spencer points out that "taken as autobiographical, [*Oroonoko*] gave the early biographers details that apparently substantiated their vision of a gentlewoman [Aphra Behn] of Kent (223). It can be concluded here that, regardless of Behn's claim, the majority of literary critics decide on *Oroonoko* as a fictional prose narrative which tells the life hi/story of its protagonist, marred by some characteristics of romance: adventure, heroism, and extraordinary action. Meanwhile, critics have not come into consensus as to completely deny

the authenticity of some actual incidents represented in *Oroonoko*.

The importance of the issue of Behn's claim to truth is its relevance to her views -- both dramatized and explicitly expressed -- on *Oroonoko*. Comparing these views, together with the sustained noble image of *Oroonoko*, to her practices is a touchstone of her attitude toward the African protagonist. In other words, a comparison of Behn's representation of *Oroonoko* to her dealings with him, as will be discussed later, elicits the true nature of her attitude toward her African protagonist. On the other hand, *Oroonoko* is not to be read in isolation from its surrounding literary and political environment. The novella is written in the Restoration, at a time when the early English novel "profoundly engages with 'history' . . . engages the emerging English colonies"(Morrissey 257). It is noteworthy here that this novella "connects fictional prose narrative to history" (282), which suggests that *Oroonoko* is written with preconceived ideas. Here, Behn's choice of the novel genre is intentional as this genre, rather than drama, allows authors more freedom to express their views, either implicitly or explicitly.

A writer with preconceived ideas needs a point of view that helps in conveying his/her message to the reader. As mentioned earlier, *Oroonoko* is dominated by first person point of view; a method which enables Behn to act both as a narrator and an embodied character. F.K. Stanzel sees this "position in relation to the narrated events" as being



"located at the periphery of the narrated events and [her] role is that of an observer, witness, biographer, chronicler, but not that of the hero who stands in the centre of the events" (201). Wayne Booth points out that "choice of the first person is sometimes unduly limiting; if the "I" has inadequate access to necessary information, the author may be led into improbabilities" (150). Stanzel also points out a major limitation to first person narrator that, "results in restriction of his horizon of knowledge and perception and a linking of the narrative process to the existence of the first person narrator as a fictional character" (201). These two narratologists emphasize limitation of the "I" narrator. Aphra Behn compensates for the restriction of "the horizon of knowledge" and tries to handle the "improbabilities" of her choice of first person by informing the reader early in the novel that when she was not herself "an eye-witness . . . I received from the mouth of the chief actor . . . the hero himself . . . the whole transactions of his youth" (1). Both temporal and spatial distances are overcome here. She exhausts what Oroonoko tells her about his early life as to bridge the gaps of her absence from place (Africa) as well as time (the protagonist's past).

Further, Behn's choosing first person point of view and making herself the dramatized narrator of the work, rather than the protagonist himself, empower her with a controlled revelation of Oroonoko's life. Both her choice of such a point of view, and her "consistently maintain[ing] the pose of reporting events to which she has either been an eye-witness, or of which she has had firsthand account"

(Metzger x), imply that she assigns herself and her own point of view – not Oroonoko's—as the dominating voice in the novella. Indeed, Behn admits to the reader that she, "shall omit . . . a thousand little accidents of his life" (1). It is noteworthy here that as she "dominates . . . as the recorder of events" (Spencer 231), she sets of herself a judge of what is important and what is trivial of Oroonoko's life. She also appoints herself to make this decision rather than Oroonoko, whose life is the topic of the novella, thus Behn "attempt[s] to create her own narrative authority" (Athey and Alarcon 422). Accordingly, by narrating *Oroonoko*, whatever "history" transmitted to the reader is filtered by the writer.

The opening of the novella is a clear example of how Behn manipulates her position as the dramatized "I" narrator, and "connects her writing with her politics" (Todd 72). Here, although she begins the text by promising the reader a truthful account of Oroonoko's life, she postpones introducing him, and abruptly interrupts the narrative in order to describe the colony of Surinam. Behn devotes four pages to enumerating the flora and fauna of the place, where there are "a thousand . . . birds and beasts of wonderful and surprising forms, shapes, and colours. For skins of prodigious snakes, of which there are some threescore yards in length . . ." (2); having oriented the readers with the richness of the colony, Behn further refers to "our plantations of sugar"(5). She follows that by naming the best place where slaves can be found, "Cormantien, a country of blacks so called, was one of those places in



which they found the most advantageous trading for slaves . . . (5). It is noteworthy here that this intelligence also comes before fully introducing Oroonoko. The excerpt refers to slave trade that supplied the new colonies with labour force. Ania Loomba points out that "plantation slavery is nothing but one kind of capitalism, where the slave functions like capital" (130), and Joanna Lipking points out that "The importation of Africans . . . was a response to a highly profitable product combined with a shortage of workers" (173). These two views indicate the importance of slave trade to British economy both home and abroad (the colonies). Needless to say here, that "*Oroonoko* clearly endorses English colonization" (Athey and Alarcon 417). Behn's manipulation of first person point of view to support her colonial interests is evident in her abrupt interruption of Oroonoko's history as to provide detailed description of Surinam's rich diversity of flora and fauna as well as Cormantien's supply of strong slaves ; an act which foreshadows her colonial interests.

Having provided her reader with these intelligences, Behn introduces her protagonist in a manner that further enhances her colonial position. She endows her African protagonist with specific attributes that strongly engage the West. Being the "I" narrator of Oroonoko's hi/story empowers her to identify Oroonoko with the white race. Behn narrows the gap between his race, and the white race, evidently to make him more appealing to her European readers. The prominent feature that distinguishes between

the two races, the Negroid, and the Caucasoid, is: colour. She tends to tone his African colour, thus, it is not, "brown, rusty black which most of that nation are, but a perfect ebony" (8). In a further attempt to identify him with her Caucasoid race, Behn refers to "the white of 'em [eyes] being like snow" (8). She zooms in the whiteness of Oroonoko's eyes and drags snow into this picture as to add another shared physical feature. The nose, the mouth and the lips are all European shaped and bear no similarity with "African and flat . . . great turned lips" (8). Thus Behn detaches him from his race which she describes as "gloomy" (6), and "conforms [him] to the standards of English beauty" (Anderson 4). Indeed, the black prince's peculiar physical description has always drawn critics' attention. Laura J. Rosenthal points out, "[f]ew have ignored Behn's physical description of her hero, which suggests that his beauty lies in his similarity to the whites. . . ." (153). But since race functions as "one of the most powerful . . . makers of human identity" (Loomba 121), then Behn is depriving Oroonoko of an important element of his genuine identity. A deprivation that aims at manipulating her white readers' tastes as well as pleasing them. It is suggested here that had Oroonoko had the will to "conform" to physical European standards, to acquire its appearance and look, he would, at least, have dressed, either fully or partly, European. But he does not. Thus, by not being the narrator of his own hi/story, the African protagonist is suppressed of expressing his own view on endowing him with such alien features.



In addition to imposing these European physical features on the African protagonist, Behn attributes his education and enlightenment to European influence. The sources of his accomplishment are either, "the care of a Frenchman of wit and learning" (7), or his encounters with European slave traders as, "he loved . . . to see all the English gentlemen that traded thither; and did not only learn their language, but that of the Spaniards also, with whom he traded afterwards for slaves"(7). As for the influence of his native environment, it is excluded to skills of fighting. Behn further adds that Oroonoko is familiar with history of Europe and the current affairs in England as he "had heard of, and admired the Romans, he had heard of the late Civil Wars in England" (7). Behn concludes these details with stating a common impression that "his education had been in some European court" (7). Her impression echoes a characteristic European tendency to portray the "improvement" of the primitives "as a result of their contact with European civilization" (Said 168). It is noteworthy here that of these Europeans who represent the source of Oroonoko's education, it is only the Frenchman who is of "learning." The other Europeans are slave traders. Yet, regardless of the dark face of their trade, Behn assigns these individuals-- simply because they are Europeans—as major contributors to the refinement of the African protagonist. Furthermore, unlike his detailed Europeanized physical features, Oroonoko's European-like intellectual talk is hardly given in details to the reader. Behn is more elaborate on her fascination with his "accomplishments . . . greatness

of mind . . . wit and . . . conversation" (7), than on illustrating these intellectual values. Behn's interest is mainly devoted to asserting the enlightening influence of Western civilization on non-Europeans.

By analogy, Behn downgrades other non-European people represented by the king of Cormentien, Oroonoko's homeland. She follows the colonizers' pattern of representing the colonized by trivializing their life style. Albert Mimmi points out how colonizers legitimize usurpation of other countries by "harp[ing] on the usurper's demerits . . . thirst for justification require[s] the usurper . . . to drive the usurper below the ground . . ." (96-7). Behn trivializes and ridicules the highest authority in Oroonoko's country: the king. Her representation of the king overlooks what she has mentioned earlier in the novella that Cormentien "is very warlike and brave" (5), and that its national income depends on "trading for . . . slaves"(5). These two national aspects, war and economy, are never dealt with when the king is represented. His concerns and interests in the welfare of his country are not represented in the novella. Behn rather manipulates Oroonoko's love affair as to reduce the king's ultimate interest to the security of both his *otan* (harem) and mistresses. As old as he is, "a man of an hundred and odd years old" (6), the king rivals his grandson, Oroonoko, in his courtship of his young beloved Imionda. It is worth mentioning that though Behn refers to Cormentien as a "very warlike and . . . always in hostility with one



neighbouring prince or other"(5), the only conflict which the king is portrayed to be engaged in is "the sexual rivalry between [him] and his grandson" (Deb 43). And his tactics, spies, and time are portrayed to be devoted only to this particular conflict, rather to his constant wars with neighbouring countries.

Likewise, the concept of treason, according to the king, is shown to be related to his affairs with women, not to national security issues. For example, Behn informs the reader that Imionda is shocked when ordered into the otan, but she knew that "delays in these cases are dangerous, and pleading worse than treason" (12). Actually the king's fierce emotion and passion are all portrayed to be related to the security of his otan, but none is related to his kingdom's welfare. The king is further ridiculed when Behn reports his tremble at knowing that Oroonoko courts Imionda. She intensifies the effect ridiculous image by not deciding the reason for his tremble, "whether with age or anger" (13). It is worth mentioning here that being the narrator of Oroonoko's hi/story empowers Behn with filtering whatever her protagonist has told her about his life in Africa. Thus, she could magnify certain features of the life style of the African monarch to achieve the effects depicted by Memmi: ridicule and triviality. On the other hand, this negative image can be considered as representing European politics of colonization. Behn "proposes" such an image as a kind of excuse "without which the presence and conduct of a colonizer . . . would seem shocking" (Memmi 123). It

is noteworthy here that an invitation to colonize Oroonoko's homeland is never explicitly stated in the text. Cormentien, Ghana, was not yet part of the British Empire. But the distorted image of the king foreshadows Britain's colonial interests in Africa and the eventual invasion of Ghana.

Indeed, Behn overlooks the privacy of the issue of the king's relationship with women for sheer colonial interests. For example, Behn informs the reader that the king devotes a part of his court –the otan – where he keeps his wives and concubines, heavily and strictly guarded. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson affirm that "when life narrators write . . . to explore a certain time period or to enshrine a community . . . they are also . . . conveying cultural information"(10). As for Edward Said, he emphasizes that,"[d]espite their fineness and reticulation . . . the inclusive cultural forms dealing with peripheral non-European settings are markedly ideological and selective...so far as "natives" are concerned . . . (166). These two views shed light on Behn's motive for overlooking the privacy of the African king. Behn further details the reader with the secret meetings between Oroonoko and his beloved Imionda, and their fear of being discovered by the king. These incidents occasion detailed description of the place and its people. Behn takes the reader to the court of the African king, Oroonoko's grandfather, and describes its interiors, its social codes, and security system.

Hence, the issue of Aphra Behn's giving herself the role of the dramatized "I" narrator of Oroonoko's history poses



the following questions. What if Oroonoko was the narrator of his own hi/story? Would the king be represented in the same ridiculous and trivial manner? To answer these questions it is necessary to engage Oroonoko's response to his grandfather's action. In knowing that Imionda "had receiv'd the royal veil" (Behn 13), which means that she is "secur'd for the king's use; and 'tis death to disobey . . ." (12), Oroonoko never thinks of avenging the king. Rather, he thinks of taking his own life as it is considered a social disgrace for someone to marry his grandfather's wife or mistress. Oroonoko's agony, which will be discussed later, is clear in his reaction, but respect for the king is there as well. So, in accordance with the principle that fictional characters should be "consistent in their behavior" (Perrine 67), Oroonoko's representation of the king would never be trivialized or ridiculed. So, the act of denying the African protagonist the role of the narrator of his own history allows Behn to intentionally distort the king's image. Such distorted image further confirms her stance as a colonizer toward Oroonoko and his people.

Another consequence of Behn's role as the "I" narrator of Oroonoko's hi/story is her limited "free access" to his psyche. Dorrit Cohn points out, "the first person-narrator has less free access to his own past psych than the omniscient narrator of third person fiction has to the psyches of his characters" (144). If the access of first person narrator to his/her psyche is limited, it is logical enough to assume that Behn's information and exposition Oroonoko's

internal perspective are more limited. Hence, the emphasis is mainly devoted to the external perspective of the protagonist rather than the internal one. On the other hand, according to the specific characteristics of each type of point of view, the "I" narrator, does not enjoy the omniscience of third person point of view. Behn's choice to be the dramatized "I" narrator of Oroonoko's hi/story, obstructs the privileged omniscience of third person point of view. In other words, the privileges of third person point of view are not to be enjoyed by Behn, even though she is the author of the novella.

One of the examples of Behn's limited "free access" to the psyche of Oroonoko is when his grandfather, the king, deprives him of his beloved Imionda. At first, he feels angry, then he is nourished with the hope that "the king's old age" would make him "incapable of injuring him with Imionda" (14). These thoughts "pleased him most, and flattered best his heart. Yet this served not altogether to make him cease his different passions, which sometimes raged within him, and sometimes softened into showers" (14). It can be predicted that Oroonoko told Behn about his emotional reaction to the king's decision. What is missing in this brief figural narrative is an elaborate description of the occasional rage of "his different passions" and how they are "softened into showers." These strong feelings and their transitions could be better handled if Oroonoko was the narrator of his own story. Behn rather transmits Oroonoko's lamentation of his loss in free direct speech presentation.



'O my friends! Were she in wall'd cities . . . I wou'd venture through any hazard to free her...Oh! She is never to be retriev'd . . . that custom that makes it so vile a crime for a son to marry his father's wives or mistresses wou'd hinder my happiness; unless I wou'd either ignobly set an ill precedent to my successors, or abandon my country, and fly with her to some unknown world, who never heard our story.'

Oroonoko's lamentation looks like a monologue as no direct reply to it is reported. The passage is one of the very few examples of Oroonoko's direct speech presentation at a time of emotional crisis. His words do not only express his grief over the loss of Imionda but also expose the social taboo of marrying one's father's "wives or mistresses." The words also tell about his own contemplation to desert his own country in order to escape any social punishment. On the other hand, the consolation that Oroonoko's friends offer is briefly given.

But it was objected to him 'twas he was the injur'd man, and might, if he so pleas'd, take Imionda back, the breach of the law being on his grandfather's side; and that if he cou'd circumvent him, and redeem her from the Otan, which is the palace of the king's women, a sort of seraglio, it was both just and lawful for him so to do. (14)

Indirect speech form is used to transmit the consolation. This sort of transmission obstructs "quoting verbatim the speech that occurred" (Leech and Short 320), which allows for Behn's "interven[tion] as an interpreter" (320). Her intervention is clear in interrupting the consolation as to explain the meaning of the word "otan." Behn's explanation is detailed, and the meaning is further emphasized by providing her English reader with the Turkish equivalent of otan: seraglio. Such an interruption destroys the illusion of reality. Further, this sort of transmission deprives the reader of a realistic report of the friends' reaction. A direct speech presentation of the reply would occasion an elaborate explanation of the grandfather's crime, the pain he inflicts on Oroonoko, and probably would shed more light on the community's reaction to the situation.

Behn further compensates for her limited position as the "I" narrator of Oroonoko's history by appealing to eye-language. Such a language often replaces figural narrative, whenever the latter is needed to reveal the protagonist's emotional reactions. For instance, ever since Oroonoko's first betrayal and consequent enslavement, he has been given promises by his enslavers to set him free. Yet, these promises are never kept. In these critical situations, Behn does not delve inside Oroonoko as to reveal his internal perspective. External perspective prevails as she resorts to describing Oroonoko's "look all fierce and disdainful, upbraiding him [the captain] with eyes, that forced blushes on his guilty cheeks" (37). Though Oroonoko is defeated



and in a weak position, yet, the fierceness of his look makes his captor ashamed of his conduct. Similarly, when Oroonoko leads a slave mutiny, his white masters Trefry and Byam assure him that if he surrenders they would set him and his wife free. But the moment Oroonoko surrenders he is led to the plantation and severely punished as to humiliate him and make an example of him to the rest of the slaves. Again, Behn shows how Oroonoko "roll his eyes on the faithless governor, and those he believed guilty, with fierceness and indignation" (67). Internal perspective, much expected in these critical situations, is substituted for external perspective. His eyes are used to hint at his emotional reaction to his betrayal. Emily Hodgson Anderson attributes Behn's resort to eye-language to "the fact that words, spoken or written, are not to be trusted . . . The tale constantly reminds us that sight surpasses description" (5). But if eye-language tells the reader about Oroonoko's fierce emotion, it does not satisfy the curiosity of the reader. Here, lack of internal perspective leaves the reader wondering at why a smart man like Oroonoko is so naïve when dealing with his enemies, and why does he let himself to be deceived more than once by his slavers' false promises. Donald Polkinhorne aptly states that, "the activity of self-study can be carried out in the ordinary and informal manner of self reflection" (3), thus, the teller of his or her own story becomes, according to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson "both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance, and contemplation" (1). Depriving Oroonoko of being the narrator of his own life

hi/story denies him reflecting on his own enemies conduct, revising his own deals, and evaluating the situation; these mental actions would have helped in achieving some wisdom and maturity when dealing with the enemy.

Alternatively, Behn manipulates her position as the "I" narrator, and adorns herself with fair attitudes as well as merits herself with self-defense whenever the occasion requires. She enjoys the privilege of a method of narration which "produces a personal relationship with the reader which inevitably tends to bias the reader in favour of the narrator/character" (Leech and Short 265). For example, the act of abducting Oroonoko and his friends is described in details, during which Behn signals to the reader the conspiracy of the captain and his men. These signals are clear in her apparently casual remark that the captain "failed not to have all things in readiness" (Behn 32) as he was showing the prince around the ship. Another signal to the reader is clear in her insertion of a parenthetical remark, "[t]he prince having drunk hard of punch, and several sorts of wine, as did all the rest (for great care was taken, they should want nothing of that part of the entertainment) was very merry . . ." (33). By inserting such a remark, Behn detaches herself from the captain and his men, implying that she is taking sides with Oroonoko and his friends. The narrator, having signaled the reader her position, concludes with, "[s]ome 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" (33).



Apparently, Behn is taking an objective stance toward the captain's scheme as she has been "[a]ttempting to deny her own complicity in the events she describes" (Spencer 229). Her shift to the present tense is a further implication that such a stance has not been changed. However, her above mentioned signals to the reader betray such suspension of judgment, as she has already implied her disapproval of Oroonoko's abduction. Here, Behn manipulates the privilege of first person point of view which allows the narrator to address the reader, thus establishing a narrator-reader "personal relationship" as to clear her of the abduction conspiracy.

Despite Behn's implicit disapproval of Oroonoko's abduction, she never pleads for his freedom. Actually she follows the pattern of colonizer-colonized relationship described by Memmi as the "colonized . . . is only asked for his muscles" (124), and he "should exist only as a function of the needs of the colonizer" (130). Oroonoko accompanies Behn with a party of his enslavers in their outings as to protect them against wild animals. His skills as a hunter are made use of as to rid his colonizers of animals that threaten their livestock.

Behn further manipulates Oroonoko as to express her dissatisfaction with some of her fellow colonizers. Her views on them are foreshadowed in Oroonoko's harangue as he tries to persuade his fellow slaves to escape the colony. In his fiery speech he describes these colonizers as "cowards . . . rogues and runagades, that have abandoned

their own countries for rapine, murders, theft and villanies . . . they upbraid each other with infamy of life below the wildest salvages . . . And . . . have no one human virtue left to distinguish them from the vilest creatures" (61). Later on, Behn addresses the reader as to convey a similar negative attitude. She informs her reader that the governor's council "consisted of such notorious villains as Newgate never transported . . . [they] were such who understood neither the laws of God or man, and had no sort of principles to make them worthy the name of men; but at the very council table wou'd contradict and fight with one another, and swear so bloodily that 'twas terrible to hear and see 'em" (69-70). Cowardice, criminality and violent fights are vices that are mentioned both by Behn and Oroonoko. Bearing in mind that Behn worked as a spy for her government, it is suggested that she reports to her government, in England, the ill behavior of her fellow colonizers. On the other hand, the harangue is yet one of the few examples of free direct speech presentation of Oroonoko's talk. Such a type of transmission implies the narrator's claim to a faithful report of characters' statements (Leech and Short 320). She chooses her African protagonist, rather than one of the European characters, as to report such a negative picture. Behn manipulates his image as a noble character, as the views and statements of such characters often gain readers' support. She exploits his credibility as a character as well as his attempt to gain his freedom in order to emphasize the villainous nature of the council's members. Here, she manipulates Oroonoko's



voice, the harangue, as to serve certain political ends that are irrelevant to the protagonist's freedom. This manipulative narrative strategy exemplifies the pattern of colonizer-colonized relationship referred to above by Memmi.

In addition, Behn's dissatisfaction with the behavior of some of her fellow colonizers, and, at the same time, her admiration of the nobility of Oroonoko suggests an ambiguity of her position as a colonizer. Albert Memmi pinpoints this ambiguous relationship between the colonizer and his fellow colonizers on one hand, and the colonizer and the colonized on the other, "Having become aware of the unjust relationship which ties him [the colonizer] to the colonized, he must continually attempt to absolve himself. He never forgets to make a public show of his own virtues, and will argue with vehemence to appear heroic and great" (98). Behn attempts to absolve herself from her colonizing position toward Oroonoko. She constantly enhances his image as a noble man, and all through the text refers to "the graces of his looks and mein" (39), which signify her respect for him. Contrasting such a positive image to the negative one of her fellow colonizers, suggests her disapproval of Oroonoko's enslavement. It is also logical enough to assume Behn's alliance with Oroonoko against his enslavers. Yet, in reporting Oroonoko's hi/story, she limits her role only to portraying his constant attempts toward freedom. Meanwhile, she does not express any intention to help him regain his freedom.

Furthermore, Behn's manipulation of first person point of view so as to absolve herself from the colonizing situation often fails her. This is obvious in her use of the collective pronouns "we" and "us" in reference to herself and her fellow colonizers: her protagonist's enslavers. The news of Oroonoko's escape with his fellow slaves leads the Europeans there to start a hunt for them.

You may imagine this news was not only suddenly spread all over the plantation, but soon reached the neighbouring ones; and we had by noon about 600 men, they call the militia of the country, that came to assist us in the pursuit of the fugitives: but never did one see so comical an army march forth to war. (63)

Oroonoko's sustained image of being a noble friend of Behn is distorted in this passage. He becomes one of the 'fugitives' who threatens the life of the European colonizers. Behn hardly suppresses her being in unison with his enslavers, regardless of her obvious dissatisfaction with their military performance. Here, the situation simply turns into "we" and "us" (colonizers) against 'fugitives' (colonized). Thus, the issue of Oroonoko's freedom is completely submerged here. Her recurrent use of the collective pronoun "we" in reference to herself and her fellow colonizers when dealing with Oroonoko, the colonized, betrays a sense of antagonism. Further, Behn even adopts the vocabulary of slave traders when she reports to her reader Oroonoko's misapprehensions of the



future of his expected baby. She says, "all the Breed is theirs to whom the Parents belong"(45). This "coarse phrasing" (Lipking 175), is business-like, and it dehumanizes the yet unborn baby of Oroonoko. It also indicates that regardless of her sympathy with Oroonoko, she totally identifies herself with slave traders.

Another sign of the ambiguity of Behn's situation is her keenness on expressing her dissatisfaction with the performance of these English militiamen. Meanwhile, as shown above, she never tries to disengage herself from them. Albert Memmi sheds more light on such an attitude.

It is not easy to escape mentally from a concrete situation, to refuse its ideology while continuing to live with its actual relationships. From now on, he [the colonizer] lives his life under the sign of a contradiction which looms at every step, depriving him of all coherence and all tranquillity.(64)

The "contradiction" which Behn—consciously or unconsciously—experiences is her attitude toward the issue of Oroonoko's freedom. But as slavery was one of the pillars of western economy in the seventeenth century, such a freedom represents a serious loss of the colonizer economy. Lipking predicts Behn's attitude as to "be subordinating and even betraying the 'others' she warmly praises. Her friendships and enmities prove illusory; she may demean Europeans, but foreseeably shares superiority over the wretched" (178). This view explains why the writer

suppresses her earlier support of her royal slave, and that the issue of his freedom is completely submerged after his arrival to the colony of Surinam.

Indeed, Behn's ambiguous attitude which labels her both "as diplomat and spy" (Athey and Alarcon 423), justifies her constant excuses for not being there whenever Oroonoko is punished. For instance, she informs the reader of her temporally leaving the plantation with "all the females...to be secured" (68) because of the threat posed by Oroonoko and the other slaves. Another excuse offered by her is that she "was persuaded to leave the place for some time, (being myself but sickly, very apt to fall into fits of dangerous illness upon any extraordinary melancholy" (76). This excuse is given by her for not being there when he is punished for his escape and tortured to death. Regardless of how far are these excuses sound, it is obvious that Behn manipulates her position as the 'I' narrator of Oroonoko's hi/story as to imply her position to the reader. But the effect of these absences on Oroonoko, whose friendship is constantly claimed by Behn, is never revealed. Her overlooking of his attitude signifies her underestimation of him. These contradictory stances: self-interest and underestimation both yet signify another characteristic feature of colonizer-colonized relationship.

On the other hand, the above discussed contradictory stances evoke the issue of narrative unreliability. Such an issue directly interrelates with "the question of how . . . [to] negotiate textual inconsistencies and ambiguities" (Nunning 90). One of the early textual inconsistencies is



shown in the opening of *Oroonoko*. In addition to naming the book after its African protagonist, the narrator's strong denial of any intention to invent Oroonoko's hi/story, and the high praise devoted to his hi/story, all suggest a focused interest in his character. Yet, the opening of the narrative is abruptly interrupted by a detailed description of the richness of the colony of Surinam. This is immediately followed by informing the reader that Oroonoko's country, Cormentien, is the place that provides strong slaves, which implies strong colonial interests. This kind of deviation, according to narratologist Ansgar F. Nunning, represents one of the signals to the "narrator's explicit contradictions" (Olson 97). Such contradictions testify against the reliability of the narrator.

Narrative unreliability, thus foreshadowed early in the text, is further indicated by Behn's obvious bias to her Caucasoid race against the Negroid's, as she sets the former as the norm for beauty. In order to make her African protagonist more appealing to her European reader, she endows him with Caucasoid physical features. Thus, she violates basic biological facts that decide different physical features for each race. The narrator's partiality to her European origin is also shown in attributing the enlightenment and education of her African protagonist only to European tutors, and to his encounters with European slave traders, regardless of the inhuman nature of such a trade. Thus, though Oroonoko was born and bred in Africa, and has never been to Europe, Behn implicitly excludes the influence of his native environment on him.

Such partiality represents a "situation-related prejudice" (Olson 98), which is considered by Nuning as another signal to the narrator's unreliability. Behn's prejudice is further revealed, as explained earlier, in her trivialized image of the monarch of Comentien as she excludes his interests to his own. On the other hand, Behn's representation of the king of England is different. She refers to him as "his majesty" (2), and "late majesty of sacred memory" (48). She occasionally refers to his political deals with other European countries, which are strictly related to the issue of colonies in the New World. The contrast between the images of the two monarchs is obvious as she denigrates one and glorifies the other.

But the clearest signal to Behn's narrative unreliability is what Nunning describes as "discrepancies between the narrator's statements and actions" (Olson 97). Behn's implicit disapproval of Oroonoko's abduction by slave traders, discussed earlier, is followed by a number of episodes that portray how his enslavers break their promises of setting him free. It is noteworthy that she portrays these European characters in an unfavourable manner. For example, she describes the "deputy-governour" as a "character . . . not fit to be mentioned with the worst of the slaves" (63-4). Yet, as shown earlier, whenever Oroonoko is tortured, she is never on the scene. One excuse after another is made by her as to justify not being there to protect him against her fellow colonizers. Such inconsistencies and discrepancies put the reliability of the narrator at stake.



Conclusion

Despite the glorious image which Aphra Behn sustains for her African protagonist, and her often declared sympathies, the present study has emphasized the writer's adoption of a typical colonizer's stance towards her African protagonist. She adopts first person point of view and assigns herself as the 'I' narrator of his hi/story. Thus, as she deprives Oroonoko of this privilege, she gains a controlled revelation of his own life, which also empowers her with representing him according to her to her colonial interests. Her representation of him has been proven to be biased both to her own race and western civilization. Her adoption of first person point of view resulted in depriving him of a way to reflect on his dealings with his colonizers as to achieve maturity and wisdom. Here, she leaves the reader with unanswered questions on how such smart and distinguished character is recurrently deceived by his enslavers. She is also proven to be in unison with the rest of the colonizers against Oroonoko, despite her efforts to assert her alliance with him. Albert Memmi's analysis of the colonial situation has helped to comprehend the reasons for Behn's ambiguous attitudes. The study has also revealed that Behn's keenness on being the narrator of Oroonoko's life, together with her implicit colonial interests, have resulted in textual ambiguities and inconsistencies that signal her unreliability as a narrator.



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Colonial Narrative Strategies in Behn's *Oroonoko*

Abstract

This paper aims to examine Aphra Behn's renowned glorification of Oroonoko. The study targets Behn's choice of novel genre, rather than drama, to narrate the story of her African protagonist. Colonial discourse is approached in relation to the text's dominant first person point of view. In its assessment of the relationship between the narrator and the protagonist, the study engages Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. The study concludes with approaching the issue of the narrator's reliability as to validate the Behn's attitude toward Oroonoko.

الأساليب الروائية الإستعمارية في قصة "اورونوكو" لأفرا بين

تشتهر رواية "اورونوكو" للكاتبة الإنجليزية أفرا بين بأنها تمجد البطل الأفريقي للرواية. و يعد ذلك بالأمر الغير عادي فكاتبة الرواية هي سيدة إنجليزية عاشت في القرن السابع عشر حينما كانت تسود تجارة العبيد. و قد كان ذلك يتم اما بإختطاف أبناء أفريقيا او بشرائهم ثم نقلهم كعبيد إلى المستعمرات الجديدة. يقوم البحث بتحري مدي صدق الكاتبة في اضافة صفات النبيل و المجد على البطل الأفريقي. و يركز البحث علي دوافع اختيار الكاتبة لأن تكون هي راوية قصة حياة البطل بدلا من ترك هذا الدور له و ما يترتب علي هذا الاختيار من تشكيل قصة حياته بطريقة تخدم نواياها الإستعمارية. كذلك يركز البحث علي تبعيات حرمان البطل الأفريقي من ان يكون هو الراوي لقصة حياته حيث يبقي لدي القارئ بعض التساؤلات بشأن وعي البطل لا يجد الاجابة عليها. و اخيرا فإن البحث يتحري مدي مصداقية الراوي و ذلك بتسليط الضوء علي عدد من التناقضات الموجودة بالرواية و التي تكشف النوايا الاستعمارية للكاتبة.



الإسم : حنان بركات

الوظيفة: مدرس بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية الآداب جامعة حلوان

التخصص الدقيق: رواية

