

UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA

FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Racial and Gender Dichotomies in Aphra
Behn's *Oroonoko or the Royal Slave*
(1688)

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Salamanca, 2016

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This thesis is submitted for the degree of English Studies

Date 5 July 2016

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Vº Bº

Signature

ABSTRACT

Even nowadays, four centuries after its publication, the debate on the controversial novella, *Oroonoko or the Royal Slave* (1688), keeps open. By means of the heteroglossia and the double-meanings embedded in the story, the text acquires an ambiguous nature. Aphra Behn seems to both commit to and rebel against all the stances, this is what achieves to keep the enigma alive and make her unconventionality to be everlasting. Thus, reading the work critically and figuring out the real message that the author aims to transmit becomes a difficult task. This paper attempts to analyse the dichotomous statements that stand out in the racial and gender topics and to examine the figure that configures those dichotomies: the so-called female pen. Throughout this dissertation, I endeavour to scrutinise the hybrids that occur in the narrative: Oroonoko, as mixture of the Western and the African, Imoinda, both submissive woman and heroine, or the narrator, who is an insider of the dominant culture, but at the same time a powerless woman. My main aim is to determine the purpose of Behn's criticism, which can be glimpsed in the core of the text as a claim that gives voice to the marginalised individuals of the society of her time.

Key Words: *Oroonoko*, Aphra Behn, woman writer, dichotomy, colonisation, slavery, westernisation, Noble Negro, proto-feminism, patriarchy, otherness.

RESUMEN

Aún actualmente, cuatro siglos después de su publicación, sigue abierto el debate acerca de la controvertida obra: *Oroonoko or the Royal Slave* (1688). A través de la heteroglosia y de los dobles significados que se entretajan en la historia, el texto adquiere una naturaleza ambigua. Aphra Behn parece comprometerse y rebelarse a la vez a favor y contra todas las posturas, esto consigue mantener vivo el enigma y hacer que su singularidad sea eterna. De esta manera, hacer una lectura crítica de la obra y entender el mensaje real que la autora pretende transmitir se convierte en una tarea complicada. Este trabajo trata de analizar las afirmaciones dicotómicas que sobresalen en los temas de raza y género y examinar la figura que configura esas dicotomías: “the female pen.” A lo largo de esta disertación pretendo desmenuzar los híbridos presentes en la obra: Oroonoko, como una mezcla de lo Occidental y lo Africano, Imoinda, tanto mujer sumisa como heroína, o la narradora, que es a la vez un miembro de la cultura dominante y una mujer sin poder. Mi objetivo principal es determinar la propósitos de la crítica que Behn deja entrever en lo más profundo del texto y que da voz a los individuos marginalizados en la sociedad de su tiempo.

Palabras Clave: *Oroonoko*, Aphra Behn, escritora, dicotomía, colonización, esclavitud, occidentalización, “buen negro”, protofeminismo, patriarcado, alteridad.

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INTRODUCTION

Aphra Behn has been, and continues to be, inextricably linked to the word unconventional both in her private and professional life. Her career as writer gives rise to a literary work that breaks the traditional expectations associated with a seventeenth-century woman writer. Thus, Behn's writing develops an uneasy and contradictory discourse, which seems to intend very different stories from the apparently simple plots that she presents on the surface of her pieces. This double-reading discloses a series of subjacent dichotomies, which reveal evidence of the profound historical and ideological changes that the British society of the Restoration era was undergoing.

This anomalous writing accomplishes to introduce the unconventionality of its multifaceted author. Spy, propagandist, advocate for the royalist cause, and writer of almost every major genre, Aphra Behn's inaccurate biographical data has led to base her personal life on the voices that appear in her works, thus, as Todd claims she 'is not so much a woman to be unmasked as an unending combination of masks' (n. pag.). Being a scandalous figure already in her time, for centuries after her death she was considered an obscene and outrageous writer, and the majority of the critics vilified her work. Nevertheless, as the first professional woman writer in England, she became the model for those women that attempted to follow in her footsteps through the misogynistic literary marketplace. She achieved to demonstrate that she could succeed as writer in the same way that any respected man. Hence, according to Virginia Woolf, Behn was responsible for creating a public space for women: 'All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds' (qtd. in Todd n. pag.). Her pioneering role has made her a milestone of literature in English, and her work is still examined nowadays due to her unconventional writing.

Behn's *Oroonoko or the Royal Slave* (1688) is a proof of how she embeds various subjects in the dualism of her narrative. Behn achieves to seduce the audience through a simple sentimental romance that narrates the unattainable love of two black, noble lovers and their misfortunes; nonetheless, that story is just a tool to hide the controversial content of the novella. In the subtext, she makes a dichotomous approach towards taboo subjects and expresses her internal debates by means of heteroglossia. Hence, the romantic theme is pushed into the background meanwhile issues such as the narrator's female gaze, the treatment of gender roles, the deconstruction of the racial myth, the approach to transatlantic cultural conflicts, or the portrayal of 'the other,' are regarded as leading topics at the deep level of the story. Therefore, the aim of this essay is to examine the racial and gender dichotomies in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* in order to evaluate their impact on the story and to determine the reason why they are pivotal elements in Behn's literary career.

1. RACIAL DICHOTOMIES

1.1. POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE PORTRAYALS OF THE WESTERN SET OF VALUES

Regarding the racial issue, the authorial voice concurrently advocates and rejects seventeenth-century racial stereotypes. Behn vindicates the Western supremacy over African people. On the one hand, Oroonoko's Europeanised description leads to consider that westernisation is used as a tool to domesticate his blackness, which was considered inferior and primitive. Physically, Oroonoko is described under the Caucasian standard of beauty, his entire attractiveness depends on qualities accepted by European societies, thus his 'Africanness is tamed in order to make him suitable for a white text' (Manzanas 100). Likewise, his culture and manners are obtained from his

Western education, the tutelage of a Frenchman moves him away from the barbarity innate to his black nature and strengthens his royal blood and his most virtuous qualities.

Therefore, the narrator insists in distancing Oroonoko from the rest of 'his gloomy race' (Behn 152) as a means to highlight his honour and nobility. Behn attempts to deconstruct the myth of blackness, so she turns Oroonoko's skin colour into a feature that makes him differ from his own race. His blackness is set apart from the conventional 'rusty black which most of that nation are' (Behn 154) and is described as a unique ebonised black that 'shone thro all' (Behn 185), even when he is dressed as a slave. The author aims to remove the traditional image of blackness from her readers' minds and to replace it with the 'exotic artificiality' (Gallagher 73) implicit in Oroonoko's idealised body. In this way, 'Behn breaks the traditional Western metaphoric connection between black bodies and moral degeneracy' (Gallagher 66) as she intends to reconcile heroism with the fact that Oroonoko is black. Hence Oroonoko strongly adheres to the literary conventions to prove his heroic greatness.

These literary devices, focused on the westernisation of the character to preserve his nobility, highlight the racist attitude towards blackness that prevailed in that moment: Africans were considered uncivilised people who did not have a culture or identity of their own, and Africa was just a pre-colonised space awaiting for the invasion of the white man. Behn's westernised portrayal of her black character can be understood as the struggle to create a step in-between the concept of the Noble Savage associated to the idealised Indians, and the idea of barbarity implied in the dehumanised Negroes. Transgressing these two categories she creates a new textual space for what Syper names the 'Noble Negro' (qtd. in Manzanás 100). Thus, the novella can be

understood as a reflection of what William Cross denominates ‘the Negro-to-Black Conversion Experience’ (qtd. in Polk 156), which shapes the literary black archetype in order to eliminate the stigmatisation associated to the black community.

On the other hand, the novella presents some anti-Western hints (Pacheco 493). In *Oroonoko*, Behn enacts a self-critique against the untrustworthiness of the Western society and the falseness of Christianity. The text depicts honour as antagonist to the Western moral hypocrisy, and the author uses the duplicitous and immoral behaviours of the white man to emphasise Oroonoko’s moral superiority despite his pagan identity. For instance, when Oroonoko is captured by the English sea captain that pretended to be his friend, treason gives rise to a crucial conflict between the innate nobility of Oroonoko, ‘whose honour was such as he never had violated a word in his life himself’ (Behn 180), and the meanness of the disloyal captain, whose falsehood becomes evident. This scene is used by Behn as a fierce criticism against the hypocrisy of those who act violating their religious precepts, and in spite of this, keep justifying themselves in the name of God. The narrator herself dispraises this act and leaves the reader free to judge the false piety of Western values.

1.2. THE ABOLITIONIST DEBATE IN *OROONOKO*

The story may as well be read as a debate about abolitionism, which dichotomises the exaltation of Oroonoko’s heroism against the unfairness of slavery and Behn’s respect for British colonialism and royal authority.

On the one hand, *Oroonoko* can be considered a proto-abolitionist novella, which highlights the evils of slavery. It is true that Behn shows clear signs of rejection

towards the living conditions and the degrading treatment that slaves suffered, which is noticeable in Oroonoko's discourse before the revolt: 'They suffer'd not like men, who might find glory and fortitude in oppression; but like dogs, that lov'd the whip and bell, and fawn'd the more they were beaten: That they had lost the divine quality of men, and were becoming insensible asses' (Behn 206). Actually, as Ferguson asserts 'Oroonoko's fiery exhortation to the slaves marks the first antislavery fiction in English language,' but on the other hand, 'other textual commentary points go following a proslavery direction' (341).

Thus, enslavement itself is not condemned in the novella, the author, as a child of her time, takes its existence for granted and portrays it as an accepted institution in the social paradigm of both the African and Western cultures. In fact, ironically, in Coramatiem Oroonoko traffics slaves and uses them as his material possessions rather than as human beings, while afterwards he becomes the sufferer of slavery. Therefore, the values of the master/slave axis remain fixed through the entire story, the European master always occupies a dominant position and the native slave always acts as subordinate (Andrade 196).

2. GENDER DICHOTOMIES

2.1. THE PARADOXICAL TREATMENT OF GENDER: AN UNSTABLE REPRESENTATION OF THE GENDER SPECTRUM

In the same manner that in the case of race, there is a lack of consensus on Behn's treatment of gender. Her dichotomous narration displays at once both compromise with a male-dominated set of values and proto-feminist claims supporting women. The use of a female narrator integrates 'an authoritative insider's view of

female weakness' (Pearson 42) in the novella, since despite the fact that she is a woman, in many cases she makes misogynous accusations against her own sex in order to pursue male approval.

The narrator seems to favour the masculine and specifically addresses male readers, but in fact, she is mocking the illogical upper position that men have over women in society. By means of the narrator's 'Freudian slips' (Pearson 185) with gendered pronouns, which seem to be unintentional interferences of Behn's unconscious, she offers glimpses of female empowerment and rebelliousness. For instance, the natural world is stated as female and superior to the male civilization: 'simple nature is the most harmless, inoffensive and virtuous mistress. 'Tis she alone, if she were permitted, that better instructs the world, than all the inventions of man' (Behn 149). Through this, Behn is making a claim in favour of women and against their subjugation to male oppressive forces.

Nonetheless, weakness and inferiority are characteristics most commonly related to women, and, in many cases, female frailty is used to highlight male power. For example, Oroonoko kills female-gendered tigers to demonstrate his male heroism, emphasising that men have to beat women to reassure their patriarchal power. On the contrary, male characters experience a feminisation, or even emasculation, when they are powerless. Hence, Oroonoko is castrated in his weaker moment as a way to highlight his decrepitude and to metaphor his weakness through the lack of virility.

2.2. GRADUAL CONSOLIDATION OF GENDER ROLES: TRANSITION TOWARDS THE HYPERBOLE OF STEREOTYPES

An evolution of gender stereotypes emerge throughout the story from subversive attempts of making gender-reversals to a grotesque intensification of gender roles. At the beginning of the novella, Behn uses the narrator-slave relation to rebel against the socially-rooted gender roles by presenting a powerful woman over a powerless man. Nevertheless, as the story unfolds, chauvinism becomes emphasised through the relationships among men and women in the plantation, to the point that rape is totally accepted and even seen as an obligation that female slaves have with their masters. Ironically Oroonoko comes to suggest Tenfry to force Clemene, before he finds out that she is Imoinda: ‘why, being your slave, you do not oblige her to yield?’ (Behn 188).

In the end, gender stereotypes are hyperbolised and males are attributed brutal power to the extent of making them seem inhuman. Hence, Oroonoko’s executioners are portrayed as invincible males, while the women who want to help him are defenceless females. Oroonoko himself suffers a transformation of his maleness that makes him evolve from a male hero towards a ‘monster! that hast murder’d [his] wife’ (Behn 220). Imoinda’s murder at the hands of her husband represents the highest point of male oppression in the story, her passive acceptance of death and his possessiveness over his wife’s body are an exaggeration of female submission and male dominance. This key scene may be understood as Behn’s strong claim for the repossession of the female bodies and the self-government of their own lives.

2.3. PARADOX ABOUT FEMALE POWER AND POWERLESSNESS

Female characters appear to have secondary and meaningless roles in the story, however in the deep level of the narrative they become complex paradoxes of power and powerlessness that reflect the contradictory circumstances that women faced in the

seventeenth century. Imoinda is the central female role of the story, since she is 'imagined as the perfect complement to Oroonoko, merely an extension of him' (Hall 472).

At the beginning, her body is considered an exchangeable male property, which passes from the King's hands to Oroonoko's. She is shown as a prize for men rather than a human being, and, as Athey and Alarcón claim, her 'hymen is a form of currency and a token of honor' (434). In fact, the impotent King decides to sell her to the slave market with the intention of proving that he was her possessor, and in order to demonstrate that his male honour had not been spoiled. Imoinda's weakness is constantly highlighted, for instance she faints twice, firstly when she is dancing for the king (Behn 168) and secondly when she reenounters with Oroonoko in Surinam (Behn 189), and both times she falls in the hands of a man in order to emphasise her dependence on a male figure. Not even her characterisation is detached from a man, she is portrayed as the female version of Oroonoko: an ideal woman, attributed with westernised beauty and moral values.

Nonetheless, to the surprise of the reader, during the rebellion she undergoes a metamorphosis that transforms her from victim to romantic heroine. The revolt forces her to adopt 'manly' courage and, even pregnant, she becomes able to 'exercise a symbolically phallic power' (Pearson 186). The 'Heroick Imoinda' (Behn 210) contrasts with her former submissive behaviour, by emerging as a female warrior against the oppressive imperialist force. With a bow and some poisoned arrows she is the only slave that achieves to mortally wound a colonist, so she appears to be set in a higher position as fighter than all the men that ended up abandoning the mutiny, and than all the women that showed 'fearful cowardly dispositions' (Behn 210). Although in the end

she returns to the previous victim role as she accepts her murder without resistance. As Ferguson concludes, 'Imoinda ends up in a no-win situation on both continents' (350), losing her freedom at the hands of the King in Coramatiem, and losing her life at the hands of her husband in Surinam. Yet, actually, death symbolises another change in her role, as Gallagher asserts: 'only through this ultimate form of alienation does Oroonoko, the king of exchangeable, keep her and return her to herself' (83), therefore by means of death Imoinda is for the first time freed from owners.

3. THE DICHOTOMOUS FIGURE OF THE SO CALLED FEMALE PEN

3.1. THE DEFENCELESS NARRATOR: POWERFUL AS WHITE COLONISER, POWERLESS AS WOMAN

Likewise, the narrator is the other important female character in the novella. She embodies two paradoxical viewpoints: one as white imperialist of the dominant culture and powerful narrator within the story, and another as powerless woman in a patriarchal society. On the one hand, the so-called 'female pen' (Behn 186) reverses the gender dynamics of Petrarchism (Hall 472) and occupies an apparent masculine position as coloniser and narrator of the male hero. Within fiction she achieves to incarnate an authoritative figure, acting both as witness and moral judge of Oroonoko's story. She seems to have the jurisdiction to advise and protect the protagonist: 'we had all the liberty of speech with him, especially my self, whom he call'd his Great Mistress; and indeed my word would go a great way with him' (Behn 192).

In spite of this, in the moments when she has to demonstrate her power, the narrator disappears from the scene and avoids acting against the norm. The narrator abandons her friend twice, both times when Oroonoko is at critical circumstances:

firstly, when he is punished after the revolt fails, ‘This apprehension made all the females of us fly down the river, to be secured’ (Behn 214), and secondly, when he is found after Imoinda’s murder and led to his torture and death, ‘I was persuaded to leave the place for some time, (being myself but sickly, and very apt to fall into fits of dangerous illness upon any extraordinary melancholy)’ (Behn 222). This fact demonstrates that despite her whiteness she is as powerless as Oroonoko due to her gender. In conclusion, as Pigg declares ‘she is to a male writer what Oroonoko is to a European prince’ (107), although both aim to adopt the roles that were considered powerful in the period, they finally lose their authority due to their outcast condition.

3.2. AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FEATURES: BEHN’S PERSONAL DILEMMAS

Observing the work from an autobiographical perspective, the novella can be seen as a mature Behn’s re-interrogation of her behaviour as a young woman in Surinam, where she went in 1663 according to the anonymous ‘Life and Memoirs’ (1696). *Oroonoko* is her last work and it may be understood as a eulogy of Oroonoko and a means of self-rapprochement for the author, on the eve of her death. The feeling of melancholy that she endures in the end of the tale, can be translated into a deep guilt due to her lack of response towards the atrocities that destroyed the royal slave. The author continually attempts to remark that she did not act in favour of the protagonist because she was a young powerless woman. For this reason, she aims to reclaim authority for the women of her generation, the authority that was denied to her in the past.

Behn was strongly concerned about the fact that a different treatment was applied to writers depending on their sex, for that reason she remarks twice the narrative

voice's condition. In these 'acts of self-effacement' (Pigg 107), Behn highlights with apologetic tone the fact that it is a female viewpoint which recounts the story. Giving voice to a 'female pen' may be seen as a device to criticise the 'obscure world' (Behn 186) of the women writers where it is especially difficult to gain a good reputation (Behn 224). Based in her own experience as a ridiculed and rejected writer, the novella serves as a mourning, not only for her status as female writer, but also against 'the fact that the public authority of history is less readily available to women than to men' (Kroll 602), since women were basically considered puppets in the hands of men.

CONCLUSION

Definitely, the contradictions embodied by the authorial voice are mirroring Behn's self-conflict about racial and gender issues. Her two viewpoints, both as insider of the dominant culture and outsider from the male-dominated patriarchal marketplace, produce what Harol calls the 'hybrid quality' of 'oroonokoism' (454). From my point of view, hybridity is Behn's strategy to engage her writing in political debate without involving herself in a conflict with those who were against her ideas. By means of dichotomising her perspective the writer can hide her controversial statements under a veil of enigmatic uncertainty. Nevertheless, beyond the surface, the reader may glimpse that Behn takes up a stance in favour of two sectors excluded from the mainstream society: the black race and the female gender.

'As a woman, single, poor, unhealthy and supporting herself by writing, she knew what was the marginality and vulnerability in the 1680s' (Starr 362), thus the author uses the novella to connect public powerlessness with inner heroism. She puts

great emphasis on making an approach to marginal points of view and on bringing the reality of the alienated 'other' closer to the reader. In *Oroonoko*, Behn attempts to give power to various characters who personify 'otherness,' individuals who although excluded from the dominant culture achieve to exercise authority in some way. This is exemplified by Oroonoko, who despite his black skin is the royal hero of the narrative; Imoinda, who being not only black, but female as well, rises up against the established power as the 'Heroick' female; and the narrator, who overcoming her gender, displays a traditional male role. Even though they all end up losing their heroism, Behn's struggle for the rise of sensibility can be valued as one of the greatest outcomes of her novella (Starr 363).

Therefore, it can be concluded that the main aim of the story is to offer a social claim for the empowerment of those who are unfairly marginalised. Nonetheless, her complaint is incomplete, since, although she witnesses and denounces the problems, she becomes absent in the crucial moments when she has to interfere in the name of others. Thus, in short, although in the novella no character finally achieves their freedom, *Oroonoko* may be read as Behn's intimate cry for liberty which calls for Oroonoko's freeing from racial stigmas, women's emancipation out of the patriarchal oppression, and her own liberation from the chains that restrain her abilities under the male authority.

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