



Divided Selves: Aphra Behn's Oroonoko: or The Royal Slave

メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2010-08-02 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: Kondo, Naoki メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://doi.org/10.24729/00009943

Divided Selves: Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko:*
or The Royal Slave

Naoki Kondo

I

The title, *Oroonoko: or the Royal Slave*, is apparently structured with the oxymoron. The word 'royal' is usually incongruous with the word 'slave.' It is historically true in Africa that even royalty were taken captive and sold as slaves to European slavers if they lost the war.¹ Oroonoko, a Coramantien prince, himself has sold many captives as slaves since he was an unbeaten warrior. It was legitimate to sell captives as slaves in Africa. Royalty might become legitimately slaves. There were also illegitimate cases. Katharine M. Rogers says that 'Behn might actually have seen such a man in England in 1678, when a tall African king, kidnapped by an English interloper, sold as a slave in Jamaica, and redeemed by a London merchant, was on display there.'² It is indeed rare but possible that Oroonoko is kidnapped by an English captain and sold as a slave in Surinam. Behn's title, therefore, is not newfangled. As she claims the authenticity of her story in the prefatory dedication to Lord Maitland, being 'royal slave' is not improbable. But in any case, the reader may be puzzled about the incongruity of the title at first sight, being uncertain of the hero's identity. Aphra Behn seems to attract the reader's attention by puzzling him, and at the same time so does

1 Katharine M. Rogers, 'Fact and Fiction in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*,' *Studies in the Novel*, 20 (1988), 3.

2 *ibid.*, p. 7.

Oroonoko. The oxymoron is the author's calculated strategy which is to be analyzed for the understanding of the work.

It is not only the hero Oroonoko but also the heroine Imoinda that is sold as a slave in spite of the high social status. Imoinda's father is the general and Oroonoko's foster-father. He is killed by an enemy in a war to save Oroonoko. When Oroonoko makes a visit to Imoinda to present her with slaves as the trophies of her father's victory, they fall in love with each other at first sight. But the old king, who is Oroonoko's grandfather and is a hundred and odd years old, makes her forcibly his wife. And the jealous king sells her as a slave because he can not pass off her love affair with Oroonoko. In terms of honour, to be sold as a slave is ignominious punishment. The king regrets his rash conduct in his rage:

. . . he consider'd he ought in Honour to have kill'd her, for this Offence, if it had been one: He ought to have had so much Value and Consideration for a Maid of her Quality, as to have nobly put her to death; and not to have sold her like a common Slave, the greatest Revenge, and the most disgraceful of any; and to which they a thousand times prefer Death and implore it;³

The punishment is so hard that the old king conceals the fact from Oroonoko. The king thinks he should never obtain

3 Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko: or the Royal Slave*, Vol. 3 of *The Works of Aphra Behn*, ed. Janet Todd (London: William Pickering, 1995), p. 78. All citations from *Oroonoko* are to this edition and I cite hereafter with page number in parenthesis.

Oroonoko's pardon if the prince knew the rash conduct; for, as Oroonoko says later, '*Fame . . . Is more valuable than Life*'(p. 85) and '*Honour was the First Principle in Nature*'(p. 106). When Oroonoko is kidnapped as a slave, he even resolves to starve to death rather than to live in slavery. But, of course, if the king gave a death sentence on Imoinda, or if Oroonoko starved to death, Behn could not tell the history of Oroonoko and Imoinda.

The narrative requires that they are alive in slavery, that is, in ignominy, which enables them to meet again and culminate in love. Like this, the narrative of romance makes them disgraceful slaves from which condition they are to emerge.

As the reader is puzzled about what the incongruity of the title means, both the hero and heroine who become 'royal slaves' are puzzled about their double statuses, in other words, their identities. They cannot be composed, their selves being divided. They are too proud to remain slaves accepting the damned fate. The narrative goes on toward the dissolution of this puzzlement of the hero and the heroine as well as the reader.

II

Behn depicts Oroonoko as suited to a hero of romance. His distinguished quality makes the reader feel injustice of his being sold as a slave. But his characterization may sound too exaggerative:

He was pretty tall, but of a Shape the most exact that can be fancy'd: The most famous Statuary cou'd not form the Figure of a man more admirably turn'd from Head to Foot. His Face

was not of that brown, rusty Black which most of that Nation are, but a perfect Ebony, or polish'd Jett. His Eyes were the most awful that cou'd be seen, and very piercing; the White of 'em being like Snow, as were his Teeth. His Nose was rising and *Roman*, instead of *African* and flat. His Mouth, the finest shap'd that cou'd be seen; far from those great turn'd Lips, which are so natural to the rest of the *Negroes*. . . (pp. 62-63)

It is not just the preeminence of his appearance that Behn here emphasizes. She lays a special emphasis on his being different from and 'transcending those of his gloomy Race.' It is noteworthy that she refers to Oroonoko's race as 'gloomy.' Such is Behn's recognition of the Negroes. What is important for Behn is that Oroonoko is an exceptional Negro. As Oroonoko is outwardly unlike African, so is he inwardly. He has a French tutor, and he speaks French and English. European education and his capability have made him distinguished:

. . . the most Illustrious Courts cou'd not have produc'd a braver Man, both for Greatness of Courage and Mind, a Judgment more solid, a Wit more quick, and a Conversation more sweet and diverting. . . . He had an extream good and graceful Mien, and all the Civility of a well-bred great Man. He had nothing of Barbarity in his Nature, but in all Points address'd himself, as if his Education had been in some *European Court*. (p. 62)

Behn by no means aims to estimate the beauty and quality intrinsic to the Africans or the Negroes. She highly praises

Oroonoko because his beauty and quality is exceptional for an African from her European point of view. Though she says that 'Nor did the Perfection of his Mind come short of those of his Person,' Oroonoko is esteemed by her European criteria. To corroborate her view, she tells that European people in Surinam 'venerated and esteem'd him; hid Eyes insensibly commanded Respect, and his Behaviour insinuated it into every soul'(p. 88). In short, Behn's point of view is Eurocentric. Besides she suggests the supremacy of European courts, which means that she is aristocratic, too. She does care about status so much that she makes herself the daughter of the appointed lieutenant-general of the colony in the story, though in fact her father is said to have been coming to take a minor office.⁴ She is more aristocratic than Oroonoko who says that '*it is not Titles make Men brave, or good; or Birth that bestows Courage and Generosity, or makes the Owner Happy*'(pp. 79-80). She is always conscious of race and class. We should remember that Aphra Behn is biased Eurocentrically and aristocratically.

She does not approve African customs and culture. For example, polygamy is approved in Africa: 'Men take to themselves as many as they can maintain'(p. 65). But Behn praises Oroonoko because he does not follow the custom. Like the standard of romance's hero he makes a vow to love only Imoinda:

. . . Contrary to the Custom of his Country, he made her Vows, she shou'd be the only woman he wou'd possess while he liv'd; that no Age or Wrinkles shou'd incline him to change,

4 Rogers, p. 2.

for her Soul wou'd be always fine, and always young; (p. 65)

The object of Oroonoko's love, Imoinda, needs to be worthy of his vow and is expected to be equal to him in beauty and quality. Imoinda is so beautiful and graceful that she gains a perfect conquest over the heart of Oroonoko who 'never knew Love, nor was us'd to the Conversation of Women'(p. 64). The old king says that 'she was the most beautiful that ever had be seen; and had besides, all the Sweetness and Innocence of Youth and Modesty, with a Charm of Wit surpassing all'(p. 68). But it is not enough that she is admired only by Oroonoko and the king who are Negroes. Their admiration does not guarantee that of the white from whose point of view value judgments are always made in the story. Like Oroonoko's quality, Imoinda's exceptional quality must be made clear to the reader by the estimation of the white. It is essential to the story that Imoinda attracts the hearts of the white. Behn, therefore, needs to say that 'I have seen an hundred *White Men* sighing after her, and making a thousand Vows at her Feet, all vain, and unsuccessful'(p. 63). Imoinda does not bow her knees to any suitors because they are the white. Her quality stands out by refusing many white suitors, and is exaggerated by Mr Trefry, the governor, who replies to Oroonoko when asked why 'you do not oblige her as you can do':

I confess, said Trefry, when I have, against her will, entertain'd her with Love so long as to be transported with my Passion; even above my Decency, I have been ready to make use of those advantages of Strength and Force Nature has given me. But oh! she disarms me, with that Modesty and

Weeping so tender and so moving, that I retire, and thank my Stars she overcame me. (pp. 90-91)

Though Oroonoko applauds his goodness, the company cannot help laughing at his civility to a slave. This confession of Trefry sounds ridiculous to some extent in the hierarchial society of the colony where collectively European settlers were said to be a 'rude rabble.'⁵ As Oroonoko wonders, it is marvelous that Imoinda, a slave, is not ravished. Behn insists that Imoinda is exceptional at the price of verisimilitude and the character of Trefry who is 'a Man of Great Wit, and fine Learning'(p. 87).

Both Oroonoko and Imoinda, the hero and the heroine of the story, are thus shown to be exceptional Negroes. They are judged by the European criteria of the white, with the only exception of religion. In the novella, Christianity appears to corrupt men. Behn says about the French tutor of Oroonoko : 'though he was a Man of very little Religion, he had admirable Morals and a brave Soul'(p. 81). On the other hand, the treacherous captain who has kidnapped Oroonoko protests to him 'upon the Word of a Christian'(p. 84), to whom Oroonoko swears by his honour. When Behn is obliged to discourse with Oroonoko in order to ease his unrest, he 'wou'd never be reconcil'd to our Notions of the Trinity'(p. 93), but at this time Behn unwittingly takes sides with the white who squeeze slaves. For Oroonoko, only 'poor wretched Rogues' are fit to 'be whipt into the knowledge of the *Christian Gods* to be the vilest of all creeping things'(p. 109). Those who do not believe in the Christian God are more honourable than

5 Janet Todd, *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn* (London: Andre Deutsch Limited, 1996), p. 37.

those who profess themselves to be religious in the novella. As his colour is regarded as the only defect of Oroonoko, so might be Christianity on which the European culture is built. It is safe to say that Behn 'would have provoked homilies from moralistic men and she abhorred sermons in or out of church.'⁶ The fact that 'unlike several other colonizing powers, the English did not press Christianity on the Africans'⁷ might influence her manner to Christianity. It is important that Behn does not quite blindly follow European standards.

As Christianity is the exception in Behn's European standards, there are exceptional figures in the novella who are European and more vicious than slaves. The treacherous captain who kidnaps Oroonoko is one of them, but it is Byam the deputy governor who is a representative of them. He is depicted as a shameful rogue who executes Oroonoko atrociously. But a French visitor regarded Byam 'as a brave gentleman of courage and honour . . . Indeed the Byams were the only civilized couple encountered in the anarchic colony.'⁸ Janet Todd credits Behn's treatment of Byam to her personal spite. Be that as it may, Behn characterizes some whites as wicked. Though she does not manage to be free from the Eurocentric point of view, she recognizes exceptions in her standard white Europe. And she maintains that Oroonoko and Imoinda are exceptionally distinguished from her personal Eurocentric point of view.

6 *ibid.*, p. 19.

7 *Oroonoko*, p. 453, n. 100.

8 *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn*, p. 50.

III

Oroonoko and Imoinda as slaves indeed get special treatment fitting for their preeminent qualities, but they are not exempt from the habit in the colony that 'the *Christians* never buy any Slaves but they give 'em some Name of their own'(p. 88); Trefry, who supports Oroonoko to the last, gives him the name of Caesar, and Imoinda is given that of Clemene. To deprive one of his original name equals to deprive him of his identity. All the experiences under his original name are lost with the loss of it. The new given name makes his new identity, which is formed to be convenient to the giver. In spite of his supposedly good intention in giving him the name and his friendly behaviour, Trefry cannot be really Oroonoko's friend. We remember the case of Friday in *Robinson Crusoe*.⁹ Crusoe becomes his master after he gave him the name of Friday. Naming is ruling. But Oroonoko's honour cannot allow him to remain Caesar contentedly. Though Caesar is the glorious name of the great Roman, Oroonoko is not Caesar but Oroonoko, the African prince. Similarly Imoinda is not Clemene but Imoinda, even if Clemene means 'clemency or gentleness.'¹⁰

Though Behn tells that to give slaves European names was common practice, it is only Oroonoko and Imoinda who are given new names in the novella. As the settlers of the colony treat them specially, Behn appears to do so by referring to their new names. It is true that she gives her hero and heroine splendid names, but

9 The story of *Robinson Crusoe* unfolds near the river of Orinoko from which name it is said the name of Oroonoko is derived.

10 *Oroonoko*, p. 450, n. 53.

we should not overlook the fact that she does so and can do so by remaining in the Establishment, even if unwittingly. Her special treatment results from her privileged status, of which she may be unconscious. In short, she unconsciously undermines their dignity. The fact also reveals the Eurocentric point of view as her criteria and the relation between the narrator and the characters.

Speaking of double names, we are reminded of the name of Astrea. It is famous that Behn was an intelligence agent under the name of Astrea, but we know little about her spy activity. Anyway, it bears little importance in understanding the novella. We need only to have the fact in our mind that Behn was Astrea as a spy. 'It seems most plausible,' Janet Todd dares to claim, 'that Aphra Behn went to Surinam as she would go to Antwerp and had probably been to Ghent, as a spy or agent.'¹¹ If so, it follows that she conceals her identity from the reader as the novella provides him with no evidence that she was a spy in Surinam. Whether she was a spy or not in Surinam, her experiences as a spy cannot but affect the writing of *Oroonoko*, which was written in her 40s but was set in her 20s, that is, in 1660s before Surinam was ceded to the Dutch in 1667. Experiences as a spy who has to conceal identity make it the central theme of the novella. Being forced to be deprived of his identity as an African prince and to become a slave, Oroonoko is determined to rise against the English to resume not only his status and Imoinda's but also that of their child yet unborn. To rise with slaves Oroonoko makes an harangue to them:

11 *ibid.*, p. 41.

of the Miseries, and Ignominies of Slavery; counting up all their Toyls and Sufferings, under such Loads, Burdens, and Drudgeries, as were fitter for Beasts than Men; Senseless Brutes, than Humane Souls. He told 'em it was not for Days, Months, or Years, but for Eternity; there was no end to be of their Misfortunes *And why, said he, my dear Friends and Fellow-suffers, shou'd we be Slaves to un unknown people?* (p. 105)

The harangue impresses the slaves into rising with Oroonoko. But why? It is true that his speech is apparently impressive and that he seems to be an abolitionist, but we cannot forget the fact that many slaves addressed by him were made into slavery by Oroonoko himself. Do they forget the fact?; or improbably does the author forget the fact? Why ever can they be his 'friends and fellow-suffers'? Oroonoko's purpose to revolt is only to free himself, his beloved Imoinda and their child yet unborn, not his 'fellow-slaves.' He is always so conscious of class that he has no idea of 'fellow-slaves' from the beginning. He has sold captives as slaves with the knowledge of 'the Miseries, and Ignominies of Slavery.' He did not put Jamoan among the rank of captives, as they did, for the slave market, because he was exceptionally 'a Man very gallant, and of excellent Graces, and fine Parts'(p. 81). It is curious that Oroonoko appeals to slaves without regretting his past conduct. He is honourable in what the harangue apparently means which made some critics feel Behn was an abolitionist, but I cannot but feel that his speech smells of opportunism. It is then reasonable in the course of narrative that 'by degrees the *Slaves* abandon'd *Caesar*'(p. 108). Consequently,

he must bear to be whipped by the slaves 'who, a few days before, Ador'd him as something more than Mortal'(p. 110).

Oroonoko is determined to be revenged upon Byam, being whipped like a common slave. It is easy to understand that he is too proud to endure being treated like a common slave. Ignominy should be cleared from him. He begins to contend with the adversity all alone. It is then that he restores his fame, which he himself says is more valuable than life. He is to make good the principle literally. The solitary struggle makes him really a distinguished hero, as his hunting a ravenous tiger makes him becoming to a noble prince. So, the narrator dares to say his resolution is 'Brave and Just,' though the result is tragic.

Oroonoko tells Imoinda 'his Design first of Killing her, and then his Enemies, and next himself'(p.114). At first Oroonoko kills his beloved Imoinda lest she should be ravished. He opts for fame rather than for life, for Imoinda's fame rather than for her life. The narrative hereupon seems to turn from romance to tragedy. Oroonoko seems to prefer fame and honour to life and love. Hitherto the narrative has followed the course of romance, especially in the reunion scene in the colony of Surinam. If he carries out his resolution, a happy ending which is characteristic of romance is impossible. Does the narrative cease to be a love story? No. When Imoinda is willing to accept her beloved Oroonoko's resolution, she demonstrates that she loves him so much that she is ready to be killed by him. She attests to her love and constance by her passive obedience. Oroonoko also attests to his love for Imoinda in another way. After he killed Imoinda, 'he turn'd the Fatal Knife that did the Deed, toward his own Heart, with a Resolution to go immediately after her.' But he cries:

No; since I have sacrificed Imoinda to my revenge, shall I loose that glory which I have purchas'd so dear, as at the Price of the fairest, dearest softest Creature that ever Nature made? No, no! (p. 115)

Paradoxically Oroonoko attests to his deep love by not fulfilling revenge. He deplores his deed for two days. He is overcome with the loss of Imoinda so much that he has no strength left to revenge. He tries to suicide himself to secure him from 'a second Indignity.' But he cannot, and he is executed cruelly. Behn depicts closely the disgusting scene where his tolerance becomes heroic. It is not his attitude in execution that is notable. We should take note of the fact that he cannot revenge because of exhaustion. Then, did he kill Imoinda in vain? Was Imoinda killed in vain? Definitely not. In Africa Oroonoko once abandoned 'the small Remains of his Life to Sighs and Tears'(p. 79) in the middle of the battle when he heard of Imoinda's death. He has nothing to do and cannot do anything in the world where Imoinda does not exist. The fact that he has no power left to revenge demonstrates his love for Imoinda. The narrative does not cease to be a love story. The novella is a love story to the end.

Oroonoko and Imoinda maintain each identity by living up to their love to the end. By doing so they manage to remain dignified. Though the African prince ends up as an executed slave, his fame is not damaged but made immortal by Aphra Behn. Her last words are suggestive:

Thus Dy'd this Great Man; worthy of a better Fate, and a more sublime Wit than mine to write his Praise; yet, I hope, the

Reputation of my Pen is considerable enough to make his Glorious Name to survive to all ages; with that of the Brave, the Beautiful, and the Constant *Imoinda*. (p. 119)

If Oroonoko had been endowed with 'a better Fate,' he should not have been a hero in Behn's novella. It is true of Imoinda, too. As at first the reader is embarrassed by the oxymoron 'royal slave,' he is embarrassed by her paradoxical words at the last of the novella.

Oroonoko and Imoinda could dissolve the condition of divided selves through death. The author Aphra Behn could sanctify their lives and make their names immortal after they were dead, though she was afraid of Oroonoko and 'never thought it convenient to trust him much' when he was determined to get free. Though he had no intention to harm her, she thought 'he wou'd come down and Cut all our Throats' and fled from him. The eventual outcome was his cruel execution though she 'had Authority and Interest enough there . . . To have prevented it'(p. 111). She was ambivalent toward him, but the ambivalence dissipated with his death. Consequently she could do homage to him, which was to write the novella. After his death her self is never divided about Oroonoko, and she is confident in her 'Female Pen to celebrate his Fame'(p. 88). And Behn's confident 'Female Pen' makes the reader recognize Oroonoko's and Imoinda's nobility. The reader is no more dubious of their nobility and their true love, which are made immortal paradoxically by their death.