

Oroonoko, or the royal slave by Aphra Behn: differences between groups of people ...

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



Where People Meet

As imperialism began engendering in the world, literature captured the explorations as well as the exploitation accompanying with it through a variety of works, such as proses and verses. Responding to this trend, Apha Behn in the seventeenth century wrote Oroonoko; Or, the Royal Slave. Throughout the novel, there is honor differentiating some characters from the others while treachery entraps miserable men, defames the very name of religion, and obliterates a beautiful love of a royal couple. When people from different parts of the world come together to reside in one place, harmony and dissonance will certainly take place. In this work of Behn, there are distinct beliefs and faiths among Europeans, Indians, and black Africans. Each group has a unique religion and culture, and when one meets another, there will be integration and discord taking place.

When Europeans discovered America, they treated this New World like the young continent “ in the absence of cities and sedentary agriculture which [most of Europeans] considered to be essential prerequisites of civilized society” (Abbattista). Moreover, they thought “ the present state of the American peoples represented the primitive state of mankind” (Abbattista). Therefore, the narrator as a foreigner feels the need to instruct the Natives to become more civilized: “[By] an admiration that is natural to these people, and by the extreme ignorance and simplicity of ‘ em, it were not difficult to establish any unknown or extravagant religion among them, and to impose any notions or fictions upon ‘ em” (Behn 2346). The Indians are thought to represent “ an absolute idea of the first state of innocence, before man knew

how to sin” (2314). According to European, the Indians are malleable and gullible. They are pure and naïve. Therefore, their culture and religion is in need of change.

When the narrator observes the incredulous impression of the Natives on the burning of “ some paper” which is done by a European with “ a burning glass”, she is reassured that it is justifiable to change and fix the minds of the Natives: “[They are] like to have adored him for a god, and [beg] he [will] give them the characters or figures of his name, that they [may] oppose it against winds and storms; . . . [fancy] it [has] a charm to conquer them, and [keeps] it like a holy relic” (2346). The Natives are described like children who never see things that the adult, Europeans, see everyday, and who cannot comprehend the basic science at which the Europeans look as norms. As infants in the modern time are astonished by paper airlines, the Natives would absolutely be amazed when looking at the steamed machines coming from Europe. Thus, the Europeans give themselves rights to open their eyes and direct their thought in a more probable way that is Christianity.

The Atlantic Ocean separates America from Africa, where there are different people with different cultures and beliefs. Throughout the novel, the black Africans highly value honor, and they never think of violating it. When the English captain entraps Oroonoko and his soldiers, they only think of death because for them, to become a slave is to take their honor away from them: “ So that being deprived of all other means, [Oroonoko] [resolves] to perish for want of food . . . sullenly [resolves] upon dying, and [refuses] all things that were brought [to] him” (Behn 2332). Even when they reassure people

about their promises, they swear by their honor: “[Oroonoko] swear by [his] honor; which to violate, [will] not only render [him] contemptible and despised by all brave and honest men, and so give [himself] perpetual pain, but it would be eternally offending and diseasing all mankind, harming, betraying, circumventing and outraging all men . . . While the man of no honor suffers every moment the scorn and contempt of the honest world, and dies every day ignominiously in his fame, which is more valuable than life” (Behn 2333). They would rather die than lose their honor. For the women like Imoinda, they respect their husbands as greatly as “ other people pay a diety” and look at them as the greats honor the gods could do [them]”, and they are willing to die if they are asked by their husbands (Behn 2355, 2319).

In society of Oroonoko, honor and the great respect of wives for their husbands distinguish his society from the one of the Europeans. However, the Europeans do not appreciate this distinction but consider “ black Africans in terms of old stereotypes: uncivilized, barbarian, indolent, unreliable, mentally and materially enslaved and lacking any of the virtues – especially religious virtues – required for progress” (Abbattisa). Moreover,

“[slavery] apologists went so far as to maintain that Africans were destined to be victims of Arab slave-traders or despotic local rulers, and would thus be better off under European masters” (Abbattista). This reasoning justifies the enslavement of millions of African in the course of more than four hundred years. Because the Europeans possessed higher technologies in science,

they thought others are inferior in morality and religion. However, the descriptions of some Europeans in the novel are contradicted with this belief.

While some Europeans, like the narrator and Treffry, have good will, the other ones obviously represent imperialism, and their existence make the assumed superiority of Christianity more questionable. When the captain deceives Oroonoko to stay alive on his ship, this cunning European persuades the man of honor “ upon the word of a Christian, and [swear] in the name of a great god, which if he should violate, he would expect eternal torment in the world to come” (2333). However, the captain does not keep his promise but sells Oroonoko and his soldiers into slavery. The second time Oroonoko is deceived is when the governor Byam promises to embrace him after his running away with other slaves, and their escape should be looked as “ a heat of youth, and rashness of a too forward courage, and an unconsidered impatience of liberty, and no more” (2351). However, as soon as they can seize their bodies, they start whipping “ them in a most deplorable and inhuman manner” (2352). The captain and governor, the worst of Christians, are opposite to the images of Oroonoko. They do not keep their promises and have no honor, but they are leaders in their workplaces. To make sense of this ironic, violence and treachery, but not honor or courage, must help some Christians move higher on their career ladders in their assumedly better world. In the novel, Behn blends her voice in to criticize some people only practice Christianity by its name, such as the ship captain: “ Such ill morals are only practiced in Christian countries, where they prefer the bare name of religion, and, without virtue or morality,

think that's sufficient" (2319). Some Christians could read the Bible, but their thoughts and acts are complied with the doctrines of Christianity. Because it fails to direct these souls of the captain and governor away from sins, the theory that Christianity is superior is not true.

When people from different places come to live in the same place, they learn the religion and culture of each other. When Oroonoko is surrounded by the governor's people, he is on verge of losing his honor again under "the shameful whip", he imitates the rite of choosing the war leaders in the Indian tribe he has visited earlier, he "[rips] up his own belly, . . . [takes] his bowels[,] and [pulls] 'em out" (2357). In his experience of being deceived by the some Europeans, he also learns: "Never drink with Christians without his weapon of defense in his hand; and for his own security, never credit one word they spoke" (2351). However, people could lose their original identities and create new ones. In the case of Oroonoko, while he is mutilated, he smokes a pipe. At the beginning, he looks more like a European: "His nose was rising and Roman" (2317). In the end, he acts more like a European while smoking a pipe. Nevertheless, he does not lose his traditional values where honor is in the center; he lets other cut off his body "as if nothing had touched him . . . without a groan or reproach"(2358). Oroonoko is influenced by the beliefs of the Indians and the culture of the Europeans while still keeping his core beliefs.

With their advances in technologies, the Europeans explored the world and promoted imperialism to rural tribes in the African and America. They also strived to assimilate other cultures to their own and convert other people to

Christianity. They thought that Christianity could justify their superiority over other religions and their enslavement of other people . However, the truth is that neither a religion is better than another, and in the world, there are only a few things that are absolutely true or wrong. Each religion and culture in the novel has its unique beauty, and they do not need to be changed.