

Oroonoko: A “Royal Slave” and/or a Master of Dignity

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Abstract

This paper involves a study on Aphra Ben's *Oroonoko* (1688) which is considered by many as the first black narrative of English literature, an abolitionist text, while observed by some others as extremely colonialist. The objective of this study is to examine why the novella accommodates such contradictory readings. It assumes that it is the “scriptibility” of the text that enables it encompassing heterogeneous meanings which should not be reduced to any privileged interpretation. It holds that *Oroonoko* is interwoven with multiple codes which serve as different socio-cultural agents proliferating variety of meanings often disseminating one another. In order to explore those intervening meanings, this study applies Barthesian codes for reading narratives. Then, drawing upon deconstructionist approach, it surmises neither the text nor its protagonist, Oroonoko, should be categorized into any absolute category. On the contrary, it asserts Oroonoko informs the postmodernist/plural concept of ‘being’, embracing a variety of identities from the “royal slave” to the ‘master of dignity’.

Keywords: Oroonoko, Aphra Ben, Royal Slave, Master of Dignity, Scriptibility, Barthesian Codes

1. Introduction

It remains as a literary enigma that though the publication of Aphra Behn's the *Oroonoko: Or, the Royal Slave* in 1688 inaugurates the literary genre of the “novel”, the recognition of being founder of this genre does not follow her. With her beginning as the first professional woman in English literature to live by her pen, Behn was among the few who achieved earlier biographical and critical attentions. However, strangely enough, afterwards, the eighteenth and nineteenth century, critics, anthologists, publishers, and, as Jane Spencer mentions, the writers like Steele, Pope, Fielding, and Richardson as well ignore her literary productions which continues into the twentieth century until there appears Montague Summers to edit her works in 1915 to open the door for many others (Spencer 1986). Then, as the eighties of the last century feminism undertakes re-excavating writings by women which were long been hidden under the pages of phallogocentric literary history, *Oroonoko* appears as worth study, captivating scholars and critics with its obvious preoccupations with race, class, and gender. For example, on the critics' reluctance to *Oroonoko*, the article titled “The Death of the Mother in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*” traces the “non-conformity with paternal law in its deep structure”. Female authorship, historical authenticity, and ambivalence regarding the institution of slavery have also been the contentions of some other studies. However, as for the contention of this paper, it is the non-conformity of the discourses of the novel to any fixed structure that makes the critics, who always sort out to categorize every work, confused of its meanings.

2. Literature Review

The nonconformity of the discourses in *Oroonoko* gives rise to a complex web of studies. Contemporary classists feel indifferent for being unable to consider its contents as ‘classic’ while some abolitionists welcome it as ‘first anti-slavery narrative’, yet, some other explore the colonialist stance within the novel. For example, many were dismayed by the idea of ‘royal slave’ introduced in the text which makes it fail to fall into the category of ‘classic’ adhering to the pre-determined structure of master/slave relationship. Thomas Southerne's 1696 dramatic adaptation of *Oroonoko* demonstrates how he tries to diagnose a rationale for slavery as if the planters did not make them slaves but merely bought them “in an honest way of trade”(5). Another group, on the other, draws on the ideological significance of Behn's granting of heroic stature to an African prince. As in his “Anti-colonialism Vs Colonialism in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave.*”, Said I. Abdelwahed has asserted “*Oroonoko* did make an early contribution to antislavery thought, whether through its alleged criticisms of Western civilization or through its ennobling and humanizing of an African”. Many critics, however, have challenged such readings. Addressing it a “sentimental anti-slavery literature”, Anita Pacheco refutes that contribution. She explores, “the double-edged strategy of Behn which endows the African with human stature while simultaneously assuming that human stature is by definition European....” (Pacheco, 1994, 492). Then, George Guffey examines that “the significance of Behn's hero resides not in his African origins but in his royal blood” (Guffey 1975). He claims Behn endorses the conservative, hierarchical principles that legitimate rather than question the institution of slavery. In her 1981 article, Lucy K. Hayden also

observes that Behn's overall presentations supports slavery's continuation, and she asks "does she pity Oroonoko because he is a noble chief in captivity rather than because he is an enslaved human being?" (405). Moira Ferguson in 1992 seems to answer her question. She contends that "class may be Behn's greatest concern in representing Oroonoko and that she views him favorably as long as he upholds her clear royalist position" (339-59).

The studies, stated above, seems to bear prejudices against particular discourses they aim to dismantle. However, in the process of altering discourses, those studies fall into the trap of perpetuating the same structure, they seek to deconstruct. Exploring how the novel can accommodate such opposed readings has, therefore, been crucial. As this paper contends, it is the *scriptibility* of the 'writerly' text that has made it accommodate so many opposite readings. *Scriptibility*, according to the French literary critic and semiotician Roland Barthes (1915-1980), is that aspect of a narrative text which is capable of proliferating variety of meanings prone to contradictions and, therefore, deconstruction of each meaning itself (Barthes 1970). By applying Barthes' concept of analyzing narratives through five codes, this paper examines Behn's dependency upon various codes and conventions. It explores that how those codes exist in a complex, lingua-cultural matrix, function as socio-cultural agencies which are interwoven and overlap, and solidify that no single meaning is final, stable, or 'universal'. Exposing the way of creating meaning, it surmises that the novel *Oroonoko* is a multilayered narrative and should not absolutely be categorized either 'abolitionist' or 'anti-abolitionist'. Likewise, neither Oroonoko nor the race he represents should be stereotyped as anything absolute like 'slave' or 'savage monster'. Cutting through the illusion of Eurocentric, universalizing discourses, this paper asserts that Oroonoko could simultaneously be a master of dignity, a slave of royalty, a native but wit, a black but handsome, a killer but a lover.

3. The Possibility of Scriptibility in Oroonoko

Oroonoko is a relatively short novel concerning the tragic love story of Oroonoko and Imoinda, two Africans of royal origin enslaved in the British colony of Surinam during 1660s. The full title of the novel, *Oroonoko; or the Royal Slave: A True History*, with its apparent oxymoronic epithet 'Royal Slave' and its historical claim, takes us back to the age of slavery and arouses evocative speculation how a royal being could be a slave and the vice-versa as well. A close reading of the text also makes the readers confused about Behn's ambiguity regarding the issue. They are likely to interpret it as per their mind-sets as, according to Barthes, human conceptualization is contextual and, therefore, determined by the world s/he inhabits. In his book *S/Z* (1970), he practises an exercise on a realistic text of Balzac titled, "Sarrasine", that dismantles the structuralist notion of the 'universal' structure underlying all cultures. Barthes methodically moves through the text of the story exploring where and how different codes of meaning function. The codes expounded by Barthes are:

1. The Proairetic code or the code of Actions
2. The Hermeneutic Code or the Code of Puzzles
3. The Cultural Code
4. The Semic or Connotative Code
5. The symbolic Code

Barthes argues although we impose temporal and generic structures onto the polysemy of codes (that traditional, "readerly" texts actively invite us to impose such structures), any text is, in fact, marked by the multiple meanings suggested by the five codes. The codes point to the "multivalence" or *scriptibility* of the text, and expose "its partial reversibility" (20), allowing a reader to see a work not just as a single narrative line but as a constellation or braiding of meanings. Likewise, the idea of 'Royal Slave' in *Oroonoko* immediately pushes the postmodern readers to discover the multiplicity of cultural and other ideological indicators (codes) in the text what Barthes describes as "ourselves writing". The readers, aware of the discrepancy between artifice and reality, approach the text from an external position of subjectivity and take active part in the construction of meanings. *Oroonoko* addresses an issue revolving which the whole world had long been divided, and which is, therefore, opened to multicultural discourses.

3.1 Proairetic Code Contributing to the 'Universalizing' Mission

As a narrative, *Oroonoko* is elevated almost up to an artifice, braided by a numbers of sequential actions. The actions are organized in a way that creates an air of 'naturalness'. As the important function of literature at Behn's time was to create a 'realistic' world, the writers heavily depend upon proairetic code. It concerns the basic sequential logic of actions and behaviours, and the readers, unconsciously operating the code, expect each action to be completed and perceive it as 'natural'. Since the proairetic sequences are "never more than the result of an artifice of reading", their only definitive characteristic is "the name" we give to each action or episode of the story (Barry 2002). As we go along the text, we give each sequence of actions a name in order to recognize them well. In this regard, the recognizable names for the actions of the *Oroonoko* might be given as "The Romance of Oroonoko and Imoinda in Coramantien", "The Rivalry between Oroonoko and the Old King for Imoinda", "Oroonoko and Imoinda Betrayed by the Nameless White Captain and the Old King", "The Chance Meeting between Oroonoko and Imoinda in the New Land", "The Happy Interlude at Surinam", "The Revolts of Oroonoko against the Institution of Slavery", "The Killing of Imoinda by Oroonoko", "The Brutal Dismembering of Oroonoko", and finally "The Dissection and Distribution of Oroonoko's Body". The actions are so realistically arranged that the readers can easily codify.

However, behind the 'real' appears a very dark design of European Imperialist mission. By coordinating between the tradition of the 'medieval romance' and the myth of the 'black Nigger', Behn has familiarized a story far from being innocent. Her Eurocentricity can be reiterated by analyzing the sequential actions of "The Killing of Imoinda by Oroonoko" episode. After realizing that the white colonizers are never going to give the Black slaves 'liberty', Oroonoko devises a plan to attain it himself, though in a broader sense. He plots to kill Imoinda first, then to take revenge on his white persecutor, Bayam, and finally to commit suicide in order to get free of a life of slavery. The sequence of actions in this episode are "he [Oroonoko] led her [Imoinda] up into a wood ... after thousands sighs and long Gazing silently on her face ... he told her his Design ... told her the necessity of Dying ... took her up, and embracing her with all the passion and languishment of a dying lover, drew his knife to kill his treasure of his soul". Smiling with joy "[the] victim lays her self down before the sacrifice". Oroonoko, with a hand resolved and heart breaking "gave the fatal stroke; first, cutting her throat, and then severing her yet smiling face from that Delicate body, pregnant with the fruit of tenderest love. ... He laid the body decently on leaves and Flowers and kept her face bare to look on". When he finds she is dead, his grief swelled up to range "he tore, he Rav'd, he Roar'd, like some monster of the wood, calling on the lov'd name of Imoinda" (Behn 61). The passion of romantic love and the rage of brutality has so artistically been composed that the fiction seems to be real. And the fiction here revolves around a very popular myth – the 'nigger' loves, kills and rapes alike. Nobody knows where this brutality happened but the European master says it happened in the darkness where the African history had not yet born! The creative writers, historians, anthropologists, scholars, and the media, come forth to familiarize the myth. The myth, then, becomes the real (?) picture of the natives. So, the romance of a slave can only end up in dire consequences. Edward Said has perfectly said in his *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) that the genre of novel is basically a product of bourgeois society and an integral part of the conquests of the Western world.

The code, therefore, operates in the unconscious generating meanings we like to know as 'universal'. The narrator's seemingly innocent interest and fascination with the slaves in Surinam incorporates a universalizing mission inherent in European imperialism. As the story happily develops in Surinam with the reunion of the lovers Oroonoko and Imoinda, after they treacherously sold from the royal family of Coramantien, the reader could accept in the novel Mary Louise Pratt's 'contact zone' – a social space where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination. But in the colonial milieu of *Oroonoko*, the acts of commerce between colonizer and colonized are governed by hierarchical ideologies. In Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*, a highly educated European (Kurtz) transforms into a savage monster that must be destroyed to repair the fragile and porous boundary between civilization and barbarity. On the other hand, *Oroonoko* attempts to preserve, by act of rhetorical violence, discrepancies of race while representing the virtual impossibility of doing so in those chaotic, carnivalesque colonial spaces. The black lover ends up as a killer, as the "monster of the Wood". The proairetic code, therefore, contributes to represent Oroonoko in terms of stereotypes.

3.2 Hermeneutic Code Enabling Ambiguity of Meanings

Many critics have identified the use of ironies and ambiguities in presenting a confusing picture of Self/Other binaries as the most important reason for contradictory views of *Oroonoko*. It is undoubtedly true that Behn's positionality in the novel regarding this issue is extremely ambivalent. The function of hermeneutic code is obvious in this regard. It refers to any element in a story that is not explained and, therefore, exists as an enigma for the reader, raises questions, creates suspense, and the story, before resolving these questions, proceeds along its course. However, the narratives often frustrate the early revelation of truths, offering the reader what Barthes terms "snares" (deliberate evasions of the truth), "equivocations" (mixtures of truth and snare), "partial answers", "suspended answers", and "jammings" (acknowledgments of insolubility). As Barthes explains, "the variety of these terms attests to the considerable labor the discourse must accomplish if it hopes to arrest the enigma, to keep it open" (76). In *Oroonoko*, Behn seems to apply all these techniques.

Making delay to satisfy reader's curiosity lets the readers of the *Oroonoko* creating their own versions. The very title entitles an enigma what does it mean by 'Royal Slave'. It also raises question at what point of history it takes place and what is the place the history encompasses. The suspense is even more intensified in "The Dedicatory Epistle to Lord Maitland" where Behn pays tribute to the Lord:

This is a true Story, of a Man Gallant enough to merit your Protection, and, had he always been so Fortunate, he had not made so Inglorious an end: The Royal Slave I had the Honour to know in my Travels to the other World; and though I had none above me in that Country yet I wanted power to preserve this Great Man. (Behn 5)

Here in the Epistle again, Behn mentions the history of the 'Royal Slave' without unfolding the name of the person and place. But the focus on the 'Great Man' making 'Inglorious an end' arouses both sympathy and curiosity. Apparently, it seems that Behn is going to represent the 'Royal Slave' as a 'Great Man'. However, the reference to 'the other World' postpones such assumption. Besides, it entitles the European projection of creating an 'other' world. It gets heightens as Behn proceeds to:

If there be anything that seems Romantic, I beseech your Lordship to consider these countries do, in all things, so far differ from ours, that they produce inconceivable Wonders; at least they appear so to us because new and strange. (Behn 5)

The apparent praising tone of the extract is deceptive. In her plea, the 'native' is set as 'romantic', 'differ from us [the Europeans]', and 'new and strange'. The 'we/they' dictum is ever set to assert European superiority over the natives. As Frantz Fanon argues in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967), the imperialist imposition of the dichotomy between "us" and "them" ultimately results in the solid division of the whole world (18, 35). And in doing so in the very outset of the *Oroonoko*, Behn has assisted the Imperial mission of producing Eurocentric knowledge. As Fanon asserts in his *Black Skin White Mask* (1952), the European knowledge were engaged to establish the difference between black and white and science was ready to demonstrate the difference as innate so that it could not be changed.

"Snares" and "partial answer" heightens the process of creating meanings of the text. As it unfolds, it provides partial answer that "the scene of the last part of my adventure lies in a colony in America called Surinam" (Behn 8). Rather than relieving from the thrust, this answer raises another question 'where does the first part lie?' After giving a firsthand account of that colony, unfolds the writer the first part of the story in Coramantien, a country in Africa. She relates that the king of Coramantien has no son but a 'Grand-child'. Yet, the question of the 'Royal Slave' remains still an enigma. And it is half past of the text, that we come to know this 'Royal Slave' is none but Oroonoko himself as the narrator makes an oblique detail of him. It mentions, he (Oroonoko) wears the uniform of the slave but "the Royal youth appeared in spite of the Slave" (36).

The instances of "equivocations" are also many in the novel. The suspense here is intensified by the mixture of fact and fiction. Behn has used the names of a lot of historical places and persons in order to make her story credible to the readers. However, the transformation of the new world Surinam into the Eden garden, into the "first state of innocence before man knew how to Sin" (Behn 10-11), underlies a dark desires to what Conrad says "exterminate all the brutes". In the process of brothering the 'other' humanity gets lost through familiarizing the 'de-familiar'. It is reflected in the following detail:

They being on all occasions very useful to us, we find it absolutely necessary to caress 'em as friends, and not to treat 'em as slaves, nor dare we do other, their numbers so far surpassing ours in that continent. (Behn 15)

Behn can treat the 'slaves' as 'friend' and not as 'other' only in the colonial space far away from home as they are very 'useful' as natives to that land and as they are multiple in numbers than the settlers. So, a fear is also entitled in the relationship. The readers switch between the truths - friendly or fearful? It is very likely that all these ambiguities operated by the hermeneutic code are potential for new versions of meanings. In this regard, Oroonoko could be represented as a 'great man', as 'romantic' but 'strange', as 'useful...friend', yet dangerous 'slave'.

3.3 Cultural Code Creating Eurocentric Discourse

Behn has definitely contributed to the European mission of what Edward Said proclaims "creating the 'other'" (Said 1978), producing and generating Eurocentric knowledge and discourse. She applies the politics of the realistic narratives of creating innocent, natural, and universal world where the Europeans are represented as the enlightened master claiming to uphold the moral rights to educate the natives. Cultural code or the 'code of gnomic' plays the most important role in this regard. It designates any element in a narrative that refers "to a science or a body of knowledge" (Barthes 20). In other words, the cultural code tends to point to our shared knowledge about the way the world works and refer to those discourses tied to clichés, proverbs, or popular sayings of various sorts. It manifests itself as a 'gnomic', collective, anonymous, and authoritative voice which speaks for and about what it aims at to establish as 'natural', 'real' and 'accepted' knowledge.

In the composition of *Oroonoko*, Behn has employed a numbers of codes, already recognized as so called universal. *Oroonoko* occupies a fictional space based on the structure of French romance. Idealistic love of the Golden Age, courtship and chivalry of the hero, his improbable adventures and deeds, wild setting - everything has been established through the-interplay of 'codes' where there is no flavour of manipulative sex, conventional shame and libertine selfishness. For example, Oroonoko's courtship in his first meeting to Imoinda recalls the tradition of courtship in romances. He "told her with his eyes" and she "understood that silent language of New-born love" (Behn 15). It is a sort of idealistic love as Oroonoko vows "she should be the only women he who'd possess". Behn also relates that "Imoinda was female to the noble male". Then, the elements of chivalry are also well embodied in the text. When Oroonoko says, "if monsters detain her from me, I wou'd venture through any Hazard to free her" (17) like the medieval Red Cross Knight saving the damsel in distress. When in Surinam he kills the tiger, saves the women, guides them through Indian colony, the image of the great hero Hercules appears before our eyes. Oroonoko is, therefore, a hero, yet, this heroic structure is drawn after European romances and the readers are manipulated to see him as a 'noble male'. He will remain a hero as far he can confirm to the norms. Behn's application of this already established structure demonstrates how the readers unconsciously getting fixed to the universal structure adhering to the privileged groups in society.

The cultural coding of *Oroonoko* also involves the authorial voice in guise of the narrator. She has tried to naturalize some biased cultural forms. She has justified the rule of monarchy and universalized the supremacy of the whites over the blacks. For example, Oroonoko is given the Roman name of 'Caesar'. In the course of the novel, he has been represented as a man who resembles royal figures as Charles I, Charles II, and James II of England. All these characters are subdued by lesser people of Parliament. Oroonoko himself is told to conquer the tribal war and to present his beloved Imoinda "with those slaves that had been taken in this last battle, as the trophies of her father's victories" (Behn 15). So, Oroonoko himself, who is going to be entrapped into slavery, enslaves 'other' as the privileged person from

the royal family. The politics here in the novel is so vital. Behn needs to justify the system of slavery before she enslaves her black hero. She treats slavery as a fair means of trade. She says:

Those who want slaves make a bargain with a master or a captain of a ship, and contract to pay him so much apiece, a matter of twenty pound a head, for as many as he agrees for, and to pay for 'em when they shall be delivered on such a plantation ... Coramantien, a country of blacks so called, was one of those places in which they found the most advantageous trading for these slaves.... (Behn 13)

Once again, the codes interwoven in Behn's narrative creating apparent reversed meanings. Oroonoko, at the beginning, resembles a 'noble male' from a royal family having "an extreme good and graceful mien, and all the civility of a well-bred great man" (15). However, the superiority of European culture is imposed when Oroonoko, "with all the civility of a well-bred great man", goes spectacularly the "wife-killing Monster of the wood" (61). This double-edged strategy, which endows the African with human stature, while simultaneously, assumes that this human stature is by definition European. In the same way, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Behn's portrait of her African prince, of both his physical appearance and his character, is profoundly Eurocentric:

His Face was not of that brown rusty Black which most of that Nation are, but of perfect Ebony, or polished 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. ... (Behn 15)

It is a novel where the idea of the 'Manichean Allegory' - the putative superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the native - are imposed as natural. Oroonoko is a "Great Man" because he has "heard of the Romans", because he knows "French and English", and, because he has a great inclination for the white European nations. As the narrator relates:

He had nothing of barbarity in his nature, but in all points addressed himself as if his education had been in some European court...So, the French tutor also "took great pleasure to teach him Morals, Language, and Science. (Behn 15)

It is, indeed, another way of saying that the mobs and the blacks need to be guided by enlightened aristocrats and by the white Europeans. Behn also relies on maxims in order to universalize the Eurocentric discourse. Her coding, "A Negro can change color", exemplifies it. She shows Oroonoko is not wrong in choosing Trefy, a white man, as friend. He is given the utterance "A man of wit could not be a knave or villain" (14). And finally, when she makes Oroonoko deliver "Blood, shoes every drop ought to be revenged with a life of some of these Tyrants", she associates the native's laws with that of the Heathens. All the maxims employed here are Eurocentric which underlies the bias of the writer. As I have said earlier, discourse operates beyond text. The maxims here could never be universal.

3.4 *The Semic Code Representing Oroonoko Royal and Slave Simultaneously*

Aphra Behn's way of creating conceptions also demands study. Each idea or discourse comes out of a complex web of 'signifiers' used in different occasions of the novel centering individual items. She has employed the techniques of employing a number of denotations and implications and connotative meanings are produced via the 'interplay' of them. This technique of *Oroonoko* involves what Barthes names 'Semic code'. It points to any element in a text that suggests a particular, often additional meaning by way of connotation. It utilizes hints or flickers of meaning generated by certain 'signifiers'. Certain connotations of a 'signifier' in the text may be grouped with similar connotations of some other 'signifiers'. As we recognize a common nucleus of connotations, we locate a theme in the text. As clusters of connotation cling to a particular proper noun we recognize a character with certain attributes. Interestingly, those clusters of connotations are also contradictory to one another, interwoven among the variety of discourses, and, therefore, foster different versions of meanings.

The characterization of Oroonoko in the novel crucially exemplifies the application of the semic code. Throughout the text, Aphra Behn has employed such 'groups of signifiers' that simultaneously connote to the themes of royalty and slavery in the figure of Oroonoko. He has been represented as "Royal male" addressing himself "with the best Grace of the World", with "no sign of Barbarity" (Behn 13, 15). After relating his royal origin, Behn has described him in terms of 'signifiers' such as "his Greatness of Soul", "Greatness of courage", "wit more quick" (13) and so on. His royalty is exterior even in his physical features. When he is in letters of slave; the European master could distinguish him. Trefry sees "something extraordinary in his face, his shape and his mien; a Greatness of look and Haughtiness in his air" (41). Oroonoko, as a slave in the Surinam colony, wants to hide these but it is such a thing that peeps through the veil of appearance. He could not "conceal the Graces of his looks and Mien... the royal youth appear'd in spite of the slave" (42) He is, therefore, represented as an out and out aristocratic and royal. His royalist ego is so profound that it reflects through his bodily exposures. Ins and outs, he is represented as a 'noble' man. Besides establishing him a man of royalty, this detail also underlies Behn's belief in and advocacy, for monarchy, royalty, and for aristocracy.

However, Behn's Eurocentricity does not allow the black hero to preserve such civility for long. It overpowers the royalty, the dignity, the aristocracy, the wit and knowledge, the generosity the "Great Man" (Behn 13) bears. The narrator's by born beliefs, the Eurocentric discourse s/he is shaped by peeps through the veil of her/his detail. The association of royalty with Oroonoko gets undercut by some 'signifiers' she exploits which is enough to connote

Oroonoko as a slave. For example, when Oroonoko asks for liberty, the white colonizers start to fear him. When he, with all ‘Negroes’ at Surinam plantation, goes to the ‘woods’, they fear “he will come down and cut out our [the European settlers] throats” (43). It has been made natural that for being a Negro, the great man as Oroonoko who has saved them from dangers for many times in that colony, can also cut their throats. Where this fear originated from? For speculation we need to go back to the beginning of the novel as Behn relates, “we find it absolutely necessary to caress ‘em as friends, and not to treat ‘em as slaves, nor dare we do other, their numbers so far surpassing ours” (12). Their fear lies in the fact that they are the exploiters but they are few in numbers. The long suppressed rage and anger, grown out of oppression and exploitations can blow out like a volcano to vanish the oppressors. But, as the production of knowledge is in their hands, they solidify that the Negroes are like beasts and can kill humans. They never count for their own dirt. The white officials keep Imoinda aside from seeing the whipping on Oroonoko because she may “miscarry”, and, therefore, they may lose a “young slave”. And finally, Oroonoko is pictured roaring “like some Monster of the Wood” (61). As a European Behn’s ‘unconscious’ will never admit that any African, even though s/he may be of royal origin, could be civilized. She may never inertly consider Oroonoko something other than ‘slave’. She finds him comparatively better slave and justifies that it is for his royal origin.

3.5 The Symbolic Code Demonstrating the Already Deconstructed Meanings

The Symbolic code is the code of recognizable ‘groupings’ or configurations, regularly repeated in various modes and symbols in the text which ultimately generate the dominant themes. It consists of ‘binary pairs’ related to most basic binary polarities which the structuralist critics think fundamental to the human way of perceiving and organizing reality. As we explore, all the themes of the novel have been generated from various sets of symbols. The ‘signifiers’ are grouped in contrastive pairs to symbolize something very abstract. However, the ‘binary pairs’ in the *Oroonoko* is not stable. Throughout the novel they are most often interwoven, overlap, and cross through the binary slashes underlying ample possibility of plural meanings. They demonstrate that each narrative are multilayered, interwoven with multiple codes suggesting apparent reversed meanings.

A comparative analysis between the two most crucial themes of the novel, Eurocentricity and royalty, can draw on how the so called binary pairs intervene to each other resulting in contradictory discourses. For Example, the theme of European supremacy over the native has been symbolized in various sets of binaries throughout the novel. I.e.:

White/Black
 Master/Slave
 Civilized/Savage
 Self/other
 We/They
 European/Native
 Familiar/Exotic
 Wit/Naïve
 Knowledge/Ignorance
 Enlightened/Followers
 Language/Sign

Again, the theme of royalty and aristocracy, which is associated with the identity of Oroonoko, has been established by following pairs:

Royal/Slave
 Wel-bred/Mob
 Wit/Naive
 Great/Trivial
 Gallant/Moronic
 Brave/Weak
 Handsome/Ugly
 Civility/Barbarity
 Educated/Ignorant
 Chivalric/Monstrous
 Freedom/Bondage
 Monarch/Parliament
 French and English/Sign Language

A close examination over the sets stated above discloses that such pairings underlying different themes crisscross and overlap and, therefore, allow multivalence and reversibility. In the first binary sets, the Eurocentric discourse has drawn a black/white dichotomy in order to create a so called inferior 'other'. Oroonoko, configuring the 'other', is, therefore, represented by the Eurocentric discourse as black, slave, savage, monster, exotic, naïve, and etcetera. However, the negative poles of the first sets of binaries are interwoven with the positive poles of the second sets of binaries as the latter have also been employed in order to represent Oroonoko in different occasions of the novel. The African slave of the first set of binaries becomes a royal hero, a great man, learned and handsome, a free wit. The cluster of meanings that centers Oroonoko, therefore, simultaneously encompasses negative and positive poles of binary pairs. He is a great man, a hero of royal origin, an ideal lover, who, however, becomes a killer. It is left to the individual readers whether s/he will consider Oroonoko a 'monster' or will look into the heart of the matter to explore why he has been compelled to kill his beloved.

4. Conclusion

Together these five codes, therefore, function like a "weaving of voices" (20), as Barthes puts it, exposing *Oroonoko* to multilayered meanings, often dismantling one another. The five codes together constitute a way of interpreting the text which suggests that textuality is interpretive; that the codes are not superimposed upon the text, but, rather, approximate something that is intrinsic to the text. Indeed, Behn's *Oroonoko* is a text ripe with possibilities for exploring the author's complex textualization of race discourses and representation of race and colonial slavery. Relying on Barthes' codes this paper not only helps comprehending the complex position the native occupies within the social codes created through language and culture but also demonstrates meaning depends on how we look on it which is also codified by certain culture. According to the French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, 'signs' are 'arbitrary' yet 'conventional'. What this paper argues is as the 'signs' are arbitrary it could be free from the conventionality. But, the European sensibility (Eurocentricity) refuses to accept what is inconvenient to them. Aphra Behn will never present Oroonoko other than 'uncivilized'. Her ambivalence in the conceptualization of Oroonoko is partly sexual and mostly racial.

Therefore, what this paper exposes is that the text is deconstructed within. Rather than being stable to colonialist or pro-colonialist stance, it switches between the discourses. We use language to reflect what we conceptualize. And our conceptualizations are determined by particular cultures we inhabit. Therefore, meaning varies from culture to culture. The claim of universal truth is merely the 'centricity' to certain culture. Similarly, the claim of the European superiority is 'Euro-centric' which could not reflect all cultures. By shifting the voices, *Oroonoko* entitles the multi-facades identity of Oroonoko and the race he represents. The Eurocentric discourse fails to give space to the dignity Oroonoko upholds. Being a free wit, he finds it more dignified to die than a life of slavery. To him, not to give birth is better than giving birth to a slave. He fails to won liberty against the Omni-powered settlers. He feels shame to the unborn baby that in spite of being a father, he could not give it freedom. What answer is to give it? So, this great lover kills his love along with its fruit. It may create scope for the Europeans to represent the 'nigger' as 'monster of wood'. But the motif behind the killing uplifts him to the position of 'master of dignity'. Therefore, from beginning to death, Oroonoko encompasses a variety of identity rather than being stable to the stereotypes the black slaves are usually stereotyped.

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