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ELIT 46B

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*Oroonoko, or The Royal Slave* (Aphra Behn, 2183)

Aphra Behn, *The* Mother to all minorities

Because of its content, Behn’s work at first seems to only warn her country of dangers brought by the slave trade since England was then at the brink of becoming a major player in such system. Like America’s abolitionist Frederick Douglass, Behn appears to identify the slavery as a common enemy to both sides, the conquered and conquerer: she does not only give a vivid illustration of African slaves’ poor living conditions, but also portrays the unspeakable immorality in slave-owners’ barbaric, almost sadistic actions. The only case Behn seems to justify the slavery is when the conquerer becomes the conquered himself as Caesar’s economic and linguistic benefits from the system later cost him his entire family’s lives. Because she spends a whole page at the beginning of her book solely on decorating her protagonist with such features that her European audience cannot resist falling in love with, one may be struck with abject horror by Caesar’s last appearance in the book. It is the moment when everything seems to fall apart, making its audience wonder if Behn has written a 43-page novel merely to challenge the basis of neoclassicism, the human nature to find a reason behind anything and everything. However, upon close-reading, one realizes that Behn has already provided the ultimate, most direct guidance to navigate through her book from the very beginning that Behn uses to secretly reveal and embrace the omnipresent minorities of every society on earth.

The first striking word that Behn confronts her audience with is “The,” since it is an exception to contemporary grammatical rules that such definite article is always to be in lower case when used for titles. Her title as a whole thus is an exception to the pool of all titles, the ocean of novels, then the entire world of writings. In this way, Behn cleverly introduces the idea of exception to societal norms from the start, making sure that her audience observes the survival and uniqueness of two specific characters, Oroonoko and the narrator, that remain untouched by the demonized, inhumane society.

Once the audience notices the unconventionally capitalized “The” in the title, they are now capable of acknowledging the purpose of two fragments placed before it. If the title, *Oroonoko, or The Royal Slave,* did not have “or” right after the comma, “Oroonoko” would have been equal to “The Royal Slave,” under the name of Caesar, which would have worked as an additional information to concretely relegate the protagonist’s identity to the bottom of the food chain in Behn’s slave colony. However, the inclusion of the word, “Or,” between “Oroonoko” and “The Royal Slave” empowers the audience to classify them into two separate entities, completely detached from one another. This is the method that Behn constantly uses throughout the book: Behn immediately begins to refer to Oroonoko as Caesar when Oroonoko gets captured and thus takes his first step as a slave in European society, implying that all events that Caesar experiences in Surinam do not apply to Oroonoko. Therefore, Oroonoko himself and all of his ethical and heroic values remain alive and untouchable to the colonists even in the tragic, grotesque moment of Caesar’s dismemberment carried out by the representatives of Behn’s society.

Through the lives of two notable female characters in her story, Behn successfully challenges the societal expectations of women and inspires them to become independent figures that can boldly speak their minds like the author herself. Although Imoinda comes from a noble family in Coramantien, has all the beauties that are identical to Oroonoko’s, and becomes a slave herself as well, Imoinda is continuously referred by her native name instead of Clemene given by the colonists upon her first arrival to Surinam. The reason behind Behn’s decision to continue calling her Imoinda and end the novel with the word, “Imoinda,” is to emphasize the consistency in Imoinda’s actions throughout her life (2226). Just like any other woman from Behn’s era, Imoinda continuously takes on a meek, passive attitude toward the authority figures in both societies of Coramantien and Surinam. Imoinda even chooses to stay submissive to the authority figure, Oroonoko this time, over her own life at the end: she thus volunteers to become the sole culprit of completely erasing her bodily and spiritual existences from the world as her dead body decomposes to nothingness eventually.

The only case women are capable of escaping from such consequences is when they have the courage to separate themselves from their societies on the matters that do not correspond with their own beliefs. Because this book is also a travel narrative, the narrator is given an opportunity to speak her own mind through a first person point of view. Although the narrator at first uses the word “we” to refer to the colonists as a whole at the beginning, she immediately detaches herself from her society by referring to other colonists as “they” and herself “I” as soon as the narrator’s fellow colonists begin to maltreat Oroonoko. Only because the narrator does not hesitate for a moment in becoming an individual completely separated from her society, she is given an invaluable opportunity to fully express her thoughts and escape from her inhuman society, which could have stripped her morality and body from herself with its single touch.

Although some of her critics have attempted to categorize her work as that of an abolitionist, her contemporary audience is able to procure the evidences in her book that reveal Behn’s purpose as something bigger and deeper than simply revealing one particular error of her society. She has successfully embedded several issues that still exist in the twenty-first century and additionally provided some possible solutions. In the world of male writers, Behn was not only a successful, brave female writer who did not fear to face the criticisms when using her creation to expose major problems of her society, but also a remarkable woman of magnanimity who was capable of embracing and encouraging all minorities of her society by showing that the exceptions to the societal norms can mark the beginning of a new era, thus a better society.