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Defiance and desire: A postcolonial study of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and its revolutionary spirit

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between defiance and desire in *Oroonoko*, placing the work within a postcolonial framework to reveal its revolutionary qualities. Through the portrayal of Oroonoko as a noble yet tragic figure, Aphra Behn exposes the power structures of colonialism while highlighting the complex hopes and struggles of her characters. The analysis focuses on themes of agency, resistance, and identity conflict in a colonized world, suggesting that Behn's narrative extends beyond its historical setting to resonate with modern discussions of racism and imperialism. The paper argues that *Oroonoko* not only reflects the tensions of its time but also stands as a powerful testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of injustice. It examines the interaction between love and betrayal, showing how personal relationships are shaped by broader social and political forces. Oroonoko's tragic fate becomes a sharp critique of the commodification of human life under colonial rule. Attention is also given to Behn's language and narrative style, demonstrating how her stylistic choices deepen both the emotional and political impact of the story. The relationship between Oroonoko and Imoinda illustrates how love can function simultaneously as a form of resistance and a site of power struggle. The study, then, considers Behn's role as a female writer within a male-dominated literary tradition, arguing that her perspective enriches postcolonial discussions by foregrounding marginalized voices and challenging dominant narratives of authority and empire.

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1. Introduction

Oroonoko, authored by Aphra Behn in 1688, is among the earliest novels in English literature and a pivotal work concerning colonization and the Atlantic slave trade. The story focusses on the life of an African prince named *Oroonoko*, who is caught and enslaved in Suriname, a British colony. Behn's depiction of *Oroonoko* as a noble and dignified figure contests the dominant stereotypes about Africans in the 17th century, highlighting his individual heroics and the harsh realities of slavery.¹

The historical setting of *Oroonoko* is crucial for comprehending its topics. In the late 17th century, European nations were actively involved in the transatlantic slave trade, resulting in the forcible transportation of millions of Africans to the Americas. This trade was rationalized by concepts of racial superiority and economic need, resulting

in the extensive dehumanization of enslaved individuals.² Behn's narrative confuses these perspectives by highlighting *Oroonoko*'s nobility and humanity, implying a moral obligation to acknowledge the dignity of enslaved individuals.³

Furthermore, Behn's oeuvre encapsulates the intricacies of colonial perspectives. Behn, one of the pioneering female writers, maneuvered within a male-dominated literary sphere, utilizing her status to denounce colonial exploitation while recognising the economic advantages colonialism conferred upon England. This duality underscores the paradoxes inherent in Enlightenment ideology, which advocated for reason and individual rights while concurrently legitimizing colonial oppression.

Oroonoko functions as a potent critique of slavery and colonialism, offering a distinctive perspective for analyzing the historical and cultural dynamics of the era. Through the tragic narrative of *Oroonoko*, Behn interrogates the ethics of slavery and the principles of her civilization.

Analyzing Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* from a postcolonial perspective is important for multiple reasons, as it provides critical insights into the intricacies of colonialism, race, and identity throughout the early modern age. Behn's novel, initially published in 1688, is among the oldest works that clearly address the topics of slavery and colonial exploitation, rendering it a crucial text for postcolonial studies.

One of the principal significances of analyzing *Oroonoko* through a postcolonial perspective is its critique of the prevailing myths of colonialism. Behn portrays *Oroonoko*, an African prince, as a noble and dignified individual, challenging the stereotypes commonly associated with Africans in the literature of her age.¹ This depiction encourages readers to reevaluate their views on race and humanity, highlighting the intrinsic dignity of enslaved persons. By positioning an African protagonist at the core of her narrative, Behn undermines the conventional colonial discourse that usually marginalized or vilified non-European civilizations.⁴

Furthermore, Behn's oeuvre illustrates the complex interplay of power and subjugation. The account of *Oroonoko*'s tragic transition from prince to slave exposes the harsh realities of the transatlantic slave trade and the ethical quandaries encountered by both colonizers and the colonized. This dual approach facilitates a profound comprehension of the psychological and emotional effects of colonialism on persons and civilizations.³

Furthermore, Behn's status as a female author within a patriarchal society introduces an additional dimension to the analysis. Her distinctive viewpoint facilitates an

examination of gender in conjunction with race within the framework of colonial power dynamics. Scholars might examine Behn's work to explore the intersection of colonial ideology and gender dynamics, resulting in a more nuanced comprehension of the colonial experience.

Examining *Oroonoko* via a postcolonial perspective not only deepens our comprehension of Behn's indictment of colonialism and slavery but also enriches broader dialogues concerning race, identity, and the ramifications of colonialism. It prompts readers to critically analyze historical narratives and reflect on their relevance in modern society.

Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* carefully explores the themes of defiance and desire to reveal a revolutionary spirit that exposes colonialism and its intrinsic injustices. *Oroonoko*, a magnificent African prince, epitomizes a strong rebellion against the limitations of slavery and colonial oppression. His yearning for autonomy, affection, and respect propels his insurrection against the repressive entities that aim to obliterate his identity. This aspiration transcends individual interests; it embodies a collective longing for autonomy and justice among colonized populations.

Behn enhances this revolutionary ethos by depicting *Oroonoko*'s struggle as both a quest for his personal liberation and a condemnation of the ethical decay of colonial authorities. His fervor in pursuing his objectives opposes the dehumanizing tropes frequently utilized by colonizers. By emphasizing the intricacies of desire—whether for love, freedom, or self-determination—Behn portrays *Oroonoko*'s resistance as representative of a common struggle against colonial subjugation. Her work ultimately highlights the potential for transformative change arising from individual and community acts of defiance, presenting a formidable challenge to the dominant colonial ideology of her era.

2. Research methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology grounded in close textual reading and postcolonial literary theory. The primary method of analysis is a sustained close reading of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, with particular emphasis on key narrative scenes—such as *Oroonoko*'s enslavement, his leadership during the slave revolt, and the final tragic confrontation—through which the text constructs resistance, desire, agency, and identity within colonial power structures. Interpretations are derived directly from the language, imagery, narrative voice, and characterization of the text, ensuring that all claims remain textually grounded.

The analysis is informed by postcolonial and feminist

theoretical frameworks, which are used as critical lenses rather than comparative tools. These theories guide the examination of Behn's representation of colonial authority, racial hierarchy, and moral conflict, as well as her position as a female writer operating within a 17th-century colonial and patriarchal context. Historical contextualization supports the close reading by situating the text within its socio-political milieu, without displacing textual analysis as the central method.

While the study does not pursue an extensive comparative methodology, it incorporates a limited comparative perspective through selective engagement with postcolonial criticism and thematically related literary texts. This comparative component functions solely to contextualize *Oroonoko* within broader postcolonial discourse and to clarify shared concerns such as resistance and marginalization, rather than to establish direct textual equivalence.

Primary data are drawn exclusively from *Oroonoko*, supplemented by secondary scholarly sources including critical essays, theoretical works, and historical studies. These sources support interpretation and theoretical framing while maintaining the primacy of close reading. Through this approach, the research aims to demonstrate the enduring relevance of Behn's narrative to contemporary discussions of colonial legacy, identity politics, and the representation of marginalized voices.

3. Analysis and discussion

3.1. Overview of 17th-century colonialism and its impact on Africa and the Americas

The 17th century marked a period of intensified European colonial expansion, particularly by England and the Netherlands, whose economic ambitions relied heavily on plantation slavery in the Americas. Central to this system was the transatlantic slave trade, which forcibly transported millions of Africans to colonies such as Suriname to sustain labor-intensive sugar plantations. In Suriname, as elsewhere in the Caribbean and northern South America, plantation economies were structured around extreme exploitation, racial hierarchy, and violence, embedding slavery as both an economic and social foundation of colonial life.²

Suriname's colonial society exemplified these dynamics. Enslaved Africans formed the backbone of plantation production, while European settlers maintained power through coercion and legal control. The colony also became a site of cultural convergence, where African, Indigenous, and European traditions intersected under conditions of domination and resistance.⁵ These conditions produced

stark inequalities and moral contradictions that would later inform literary representations of colonialism.

Aphra Behn's engagement with colonial discourse is inseparable from her time in Suriname during the 1660s. Her exposure to plantation slavery and colonial governance provided firsthand insight into the brutality of the system and the tensions between European authority and enslaved populations.⁶ These experiences directly shaped *Oroonoko*¹ which is set in Suriname and centers on the enslavement of an African prince within the plantation economy.

In *Oroonoko*, Behn uses the colonial setting to explore slavery's moral and political contradictions. By portraying her protagonist as noble and honorable, she challenges prevailing racial assumptions while simultaneously revealing the violence underpinning plantation society.³ Although Behn critiques the cruelty of slavery, her narrative remains ambivalent, reflecting both sympathy for the enslaved and complicity within colonial ideology.⁴

Behn's writing thus emerges from the specific historical conditions of Suriname's plantation system. Her work provides a critical lens through which to examine colonial power, race, and resistance, situating *Oroonoko* at the intersection of literary expression and the lived realities of 17th-century Atlantic slavery.

3.2. The socio-political landscape reflected in *Oroonoko*

Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, released in 1688, offers a poignant commentary on the socio-political dynamics of the 17th century, especially on colonialism, race, and the shifting notions of honor and liberty. Situated within the context of the transatlantic slave trade and British colonial expansion, Behn's narrative challenges the moral inconsistencies inherent in colonial actions.

The protagonist, *Oroonoko*, is an African prince who is apprehended and sold into slavery in Suriname, a British territory. His esteemed ancestry and dignified demeanor contest modern perceptions of Africans, undermining the dominant racial hierarchies of the moment. Behn's depiction of *Oroonoko* demonstrates an understanding of the inequities of slavery, underscoring the cruelty endured by enslaved individuals while concurrently accentuating their humanity.⁷

The socio-political landscape of the late 17th century was characterized by fervent discussions on slavery and individual rights. The expanding economic interests of European powers in the Americas, especially in sugar and tobacco plantations, were primarily dependent on enslaved labor, resulting in the establishment of racial hierarchies.⁸ Behn's narrative encapsulates this tension, demonstrating

the frequent conflict between the economic demands of colonialism and the nascent Enlightenment principles of liberty and human rights.⁹

Furthermore, Behn's oeuvre illustrates the gender dynamics of her time. As a female author in a patriarchal society, she navigated the intricate intersections of gender, power, and colonialism. The character of Imoinda, Oroonoko's beloved, embodies both strength and fragility, highlighting the restricted agency afforded to women in both colonial and domestic contexts.¹⁰ Behn critiques these limitations while exploring romantic ideals of love and fidelity, exemplified by the tragic fates of Oroonoko and Imoinda.

Moreover, the narrative structure of *Oroonoko*, which blends elements of autobiography and fiction, positions Behn as both an observer and a participant in the colonial experience. By framing her tale as a travelogue, she lends an air of authenticity to her critique, prompting readers to reflect on the ethical complexities of colonialism.¹¹

Oroonoko serves as a profound critique of the 17th-century socio-political landscape, confronting themes of race, gender, and the moral dilemmas associated with colonialism. Behn's work invites critical examination of the legacy of these themes, rendering it essential for understanding the historical and cultural dynamics of the era.

Behn's *Oroonoko* anticipates concerns explored in later postcolonial literature, such as the cultural and identity erosion highlighted in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.¹² Like Hughes's critique of racial and psychological violence,¹³ Behn foregrounds the moral and emotional costs of slavery. Compared with early colonial realism in *Robinson Crusoe*,¹⁴ her narrative both depicts and resists colonial domination.

4. The character of Oroonoko: Defiance and identity

4.1. Oroonoko as a representation of the noble savage

Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* is often viewed as a precursor to the "noble savage" archetype, idealizing indigenous populations as untainted by civilization and intrinsically virtuous. This portrayal of Oroonoko, an African prince ensnared and trafficked into slavery, provokes critical inquiries into colonialism, race, and identity in the 17th century.

The noble savage archetype was prominent during the Enlightenment, characterized by philosophical exploration

of humanity and civilization. Thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that humans are inherently virtuous, with society serving as the corrupting influence.¹⁵ Behn's depiction of Oroonoko aligns with this philosophy; he is portrayed as a paragon of honor, valor, and integrity, starkly contrasting with European figures who embody the greed and brutality of colonialism.³

Oroonoko's nobility is underscored by his royal lineage and ethical principles. He possesses profound integrity, rejecting the indignity of servitude without hesitation. His struggle can be interpreted as a defiance against colonial power, establishing him as a heroic figure embodying the ideals of liberty and autonomy.⁴ This valorization complicates the narrative of the noble savage, depicting a victim who retains agency and dignity.

However, this portrayal raises critical questions about the limitations of the noble savage paradigm. While Behn presents Oroonoko as noble and dignified, this characterization can also exoticize and oversimplify complex cultural identities. By framing Oroonoko as a "noble," Behn risks perpetuating colonial perspectives that view him through European norms and ideals.⁵ This duality is crucial for understanding the socio-political dynamics of the time, illustrating the contradictions between reverence for the "natural" virtues of indigenous populations and the desire to dominate and exploit them.²

Moreover, Behn's narrative highlights Oroonoko's tragic fate, accentuating the deleterious effects of colonialism. His suffering critiques the harsh realities of the slave trade, exposing the ethical shortcomings of European society. In this context, Oroonoko emerges as a tragic hero, embodying the human toll of colonial ambitions and prompting readers to grapple with the moral implications of slavery and exploitation.

The connection between Oroonoko and Imoinda exemplifies the noble savage archetype. Imoinda's character is crafted to embody both strength and vulnerability, rendering her an archetype of beauty and loyalty.¹⁰ This depiction, though idealized, confirms the perception that indigenous women are often viewed through a colonial lens—an idealized yet objectified perspective.

Oroonoko embodies a multifaceted representation of the noble savage archetype, intertwining themes of honor, tragedy, and colonial critique. Behn's narrative compels readers to confront the paradoxes inherent in this portrayal, as Oroonoko encapsulates both the nobility of the human spirit and the brutal realities of colonial oppression. Through this duality, Behn constructs a compelling critique of the legacy of colonialism, prompting

a reevaluation of indigenous identities.

4.2. The significance of Oroonoko's resistance against slavery

Oroonoko's resistance to slavery is most powerfully articulated in the Suriname slave revolt, a pivotal scene in which Behn transforms her protagonist from a symbolic victim into a political leader. In this episode, resistance is not abstract but enacted through speech, collective mobilization, and moral appeal. Behn's narration carefully frames Oroonoko's revolt as rational and ethically justified, rather than impulsive or violent, thereby challenging colonial representations of enslaved resistance as barbaric or irrational. By narrating the revolt through Oroonoko's voice and moral reasoning, Behn reframes colonial authority itself as illegitimate. The failure of European promises, repeatedly emphasized in this scene, exposes colonial governance as dependent on betrayal rather than law, transforming Oroonoko's resistance into an indictment of the colonial system rather than an act of personal defiance alone.

During the revolt, Oroonoko's rhetoric is central to Behn's representation of resistance. His repeated insistence that he "will not be a slave" is delivered in uncompromising first-person declarations, reinforcing his agency and moral authority. The absolutist structure of this language allows no negotiation with enslavement, framing freedom as an ethical necessity rather than a political option. Behn's narrative voice supports this position by presenting Oroonoko's words without irony or skepticism, encouraging the reader to view his rebellion as justified rather than criminal.

The bond between Oroonoko and Imoinda further underscores the concept of resistance. Their relationship, grounded in mutual love and respect, serves as a source of strength as they endure the horrors of slavery together. Imoinda's fate exemplifies the harsh reality of colonialism, intensifying Oroonoko's resolve to fight for their liberation. Behn portrays their love as both a sanctuary and a catalyst, emphasizing the interconnectedness of personal relationships and collective struggles against injustice.¹⁰ Together, Oroonoko and Imoinda confront the injustices they face, rendering their resistance a shared endeavor.

Furthermore, Behn's narrative critiques the ethical deficiencies of European society. Oroonoko's tragic journey exposes the contradictions inherent in colonialism, particularly the disparity between professed ideals of liberty and justice and the harsh realities of exploitation and brutality. His resistance serves as a potent critique of the moral issues faced by colonizers, compelling readers to acknowledge the human cost of their actions. The

depiction of Oroonoko as a tragic hero illustrates that his struggle transcends personal conflict, serving as a critique of the foundations of colonial exploitation.

Oroonoko's defiance against slavery constitutes a profound meditation on dignity, identity, and moral complexity. Behn's narrative encourages readers to reflect on the intricacies of freedom and the moral implications of colonialism. Oroonoko's struggle becomes a timeless tribute to the resilient human spirit in the face of oppression, emphasizing the universal quest for autonomy and justice that resonates throughout history. Behn's work is a significant examination of resistance, making *Oroonoko* essential in discussions of slavery and human rights.

4.3. Exploration of Oroonoko's internal conflict regarding identity and autonomy

In Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, the eponymous character grapples with significant internal struggles surrounding his identity and autonomy following his abduction and enslavement. Behn adeptly weaves Oroonoko's tribulations into the narrative, depicting the conflict between his noble lineage and the harsh realities of his captivity. This exploration of identity and autonomy raises vital questions regarding race, dignity, and the human spirit in the context of oppression.

Oroonoko's internal conflict is most pronounced in his reflection on his identity as a prince versus his current status as a slave. From the outset, he is portrayed as a figure of dignity and integrity. He asserts, "I was born a Prince, and I possessed a noble heart, which could not endure the notion of being a slave."¹¹(p.13) This declaration emphasizes the stark contrast between his royal identity and the humiliation he faces as an oppressed individual. His awareness of his noble heritage intensifies his internal struggle; he finds it difficult to reconcile his royal identity with the indignities of servitude, leading to profound dislocation and despair.

Oroonoko's strong sense of honor profoundly influences his identity as he faces the adversities of slavery. He is acutely aware of the cultural expectations tied to his royal lineage, which dictate that he behaves with dignity and honesty. He expresses sorrow, "However, I shall never witness my homeland again; and when I depart, who will recall my existence?"¹²(p.44) This statement reveals his fear of erasure—his identity, struggles, and dignity reduced to mere footnotes in colonial discourse. Oroonoko's awareness of his potential obscurity exacerbates his emotional turmoil, as he grapples with the possibility of losing both identity and legacy.

The pursuit of autonomy is a central motif in the narrative. Oroonoko's determination to regain his freedom

serves as a catalyst for his internal conflict. He recognizes that true autonomy goes beyond mere physical liberty; it encompasses the capacity to affirm one's identity and dignity. In a moment of despair, he declares, "I will not be a slave, nor will I perish as one."^{1(p.51)} This statement embodies his rejection of his circumstances and his resolve to fight for his dignity. He adamantly proclaims, "I will not tolerate this ignoble and despicable treatment,"^{1(p.66)} emphasizing his refusal to sacrifice his identity or yield to subjugation.

Oroonoko's emotional struggle is further complicated by his relationship with Imoinda, his beloved. Their connection symbolizes a shared quest for freedom and self-identity. Oroonoko's deep affection for Imoinda often leads him to view their relationship as a source of strength. He asserts, "When I am with her, I feel as if I remain a Prince, still deserving of love and honor."^{1(p.39)} This sentiment underscores how his bond with Imoinda anchors him in his identity and imparts a sense of purpose. However, the perils they both face in their servitude complicate this bond, leading Oroonoko to question his ability to protect her while asserting his own independence.

He expresses anguish at the thought of Imoinda being sold, lamenting, "My heart breaks at the thought of my dear Imoinda being sold."^{1(p.53)} The pain of their separation compels him to acknowledge the limits of his autonomy within the framework of slavery, fueling his resolve to revolt against the system that has robbed them both of their dignity.

The tragic fate of Imoinda acts as a catalyst for Oroonoko's ultimate rebellion against slavery. After her capture, Oroonoko experiences intense grief and a sense of helplessness. He reflects, "What can a man do when the object of his affection is removed, leaving him with nothing but his own grief?"^{1(p.67)} This moment encapsulates his suffering and the realization that his identity is irrevocably linked to those he loves. The loss of Imoinda forces him to confront the constraints of his autonomy within the system of slavery, propelling him towards rebellion against the forces that have stripped them both of their dignity.

Ultimately, Oroonoko's internal struggle culminates in his tragic decision to end his life rather than endure enslavement. In his final moments, he proclaims, "I would prefer death to living as a slave."^{1(p.74)} He poignantly states, "To die is preferable to living a life of shame."^{1(p.76)} This powerful declaration encapsulates the depth of his quest for identity and individuality. Oroonoko's choice underscores the desperation often accompanying the loss of autonomy and serves as a profound critique of the institution of slavery.

Behn's *Oroonoko* skillfully examines the internal

struggles associated with identity and autonomy through the figure of Oroonoko. His battle against the harsh realities of slavery, combined with his desire for freedom and dignity, highlights the complexities of human experience under captivity. In *Oroonoko*, Behn condemns slavery while celebrating the resilience of the human spirit in the pursuit of individuality and liberty.

5. Language, narrative style, and revolutionary spirit in *Oroonoko*

Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, published in 1688, is a pivotal work that skillfully integrates language, narrative technique, and innovative themes to explore the intricacies of colonialism and slavery. Behn's eloquent language and vivid imagery craft a powerful critique of the social and political landscape of her time. Moreover, her narrative significantly influences the formation of both resistance and identity, ultimately enhancing the revolutionary spirit that permeates the text.

5.1. Analysis of Behn's use of language and imagery

Behn's diction in *Oroonoko* is both refined and poignant, utilizing vivid imagery to emphasize the dignity and humanity of her protagonist. From the outset, she depicts Oroonoko as an embodiment of extraordinary beauty and grace. She states, "He was a man of great, and most exquisite beauty,"^{1(p.12)} immediately affirming his royal status. This portrayal elevates Oroonoko beyond the clichés typically associated with enslaved individuals, presenting him as a complex figure deserving of respect and dignity.

Metaphors and similes further enhance Behn's imagery. When depicting the allure of Oroonoko and Imoinda, she states, "Their beauty was so transcendent, that it amazed all who beheld them."^{1(p.20)} Such comparisons not only highlight their physical characteristics but also suggest a deeper, almost transcendent quality to their love. Behn's language elevates their relationship, portraying it as noble and transcendent amid the horrors of slavery.

Behn employs contrasting imagery to underscore the brutality of the colonial experience. The picturesque depictions of Oroonoko's homeland sharply contrast with the degradation he suffers as a slave. She asserts, "The land is the most beautiful, the most fruitful, and the most plentiful,"^{1(p.10)} juxtaposing this with the grim realities of captivity. This paradox highlights the loss of innocence and the tragic transformation of Oroonoko's existence.

Moreover, Behn's diction encapsulates Oroonoko's internal conflict as he grapples with his identity. He frequently reflects on his princely status, asserting, "I was born a Prince, and I possessed a noble heart, that

could not endure the notion of being a slave.”^{1(p.13)} This internal struggle is powerfully expressed through Behn's sophisticated vocabulary, which conveys his anguish and resistance. Her meticulous diction fosters emotional resonance, allowing readers to connect deeply with Oroonoko's suffering.

5.2. The role of storytelling in shaping resistance and identity

Storytelling serves as a potent instrument in *Oroonoko*, utilized to construct Oroonoko's defiance and validate his identity. Behn frames her narrative as a counter-narrative to prevailing colonial discourse, enabling Oroonoko to articulate his own story. By granting him a voice, she allows him to confront the conditions of his servitude. He asserts, “I will not be a slave, and I will not die a slave,”^{1(p.51)} a statement that encapsulates his rejection of dehumanization.

The act of storytelling transforms into an act of resistance. Oroonoko's reflections on his past reaffirm his identity as a prince, reminding both himself and the reader of his inherent nobility. He contemplates his homeland, asserting, “I possessed a country that was mine, and a populace that was mine.”^{1(p.30)} This recollection is not mere nostalgia; it becomes an essential element of his defiance against the erasure of his identity by colonial powers.

Behn also employs the power of oral tradition in her narrative. Oroonoko frequently recounts tales of valor and integrity from his homeland, reinforcing his cultural identity. He states, “In our country, we have a proverb: ‘A man who does not honour his own kin is not a man at all.’”^{1(p.45)} This insight illustrates his connection to his cultural heritage and underscores the significance of storytelling in preserving identity amid persecution.

Furthermore, Behn's narrative style allows for moments of introspection, enabling readers to engage deeply with Oroonoko's psychological struggles. His desire for autonomy is expressed through his thoughts and emotions, resulting in a multifaceted character who embodies both vulnerability and resilience. Oroonoko articulates the pain of being trapped between his love for Imoinda and the grim reality of their servitude, lamenting, “What can a man do when the very object of his affection is seized from him?”^{1(p.67)} This reflects the depth of his emotional turmoil and the transformative power of love as a form of resistance.

Oroonoko's yearning for freedom is vividly articulated when he proclaims, “I will be free or die.”^{1(p.73)} This sentiment embodies his revolutionary spirit, as he rejects the dehumanizing forces of slavery. His commitment to liberation not only defines his character but also serves as a

clarion call for others enduring injustice.

5.3. Behn's narrative choices contributions to the revolutionary themes in the novel

Behn's revolutionary intervention in *Oroonoko* operates most forcefully through her narrative voice, particularly in moments where she positions herself as an eyewitness to colonial violence. By asserting narrative authority, Behn not only authenticates Oroonoko's suffering for a European readership but also controls how resistance is represented, revealing the tensions between sympathy and colonial mediation. She creates a hybrid narrative that challenges traditional representations of enslaved individuals and colonial subjects. The first-person narrative voice imparts authenticity to Oroonoko's story, making his struggles feel both realistic and tragic.

When Behn directly addresses the reader, she disrupts narrative neutrality and transforms the text into a moral appeal. Her interventions invite readers to judge colonial actions through an ethical lens, positioning sympathy for Oroonoko as a test of moral credibility. This strategy aligns narrative authority with political critique, making storytelling itself a form of resistance. She often interjects her own views, asserting, “I am certain that the Europeans' inhumanity is indefensible.”^{1(p.84)} This commentary prompts readers to critically engage with the ethical implications of colonialism and slavery. Behn's willingness to question her own culture positions her as a revolutionary voice, advocating for the humanity of enslaved people.

The structure of the narrative further underscores the theme of resistance. Oroonoko's journey is marked by escalating struggles, culminating in his dramatic revolt against the institution of slavery. His final declaration, “I had rather die than live a slave,”^{1(p.74)} serves as a powerful expression of defiance. This conclusion is not merely a personal tragedy but also symbolizes the broader struggle for liberation faced by many oppressed individuals.

Behn's use of tragedy as a narrative element enhances the text's revolutionary spirit. The fates of Oroonoko and Imoinda poignantly illustrate the consequences of colonial subjugation. Their deaths act as a clarion call, urging readers to confront the injustices of slavery and reflect on the ethical implications of their complicity in such systems.

The emotional impact of Behn's narrative is amplified by her vivid imagery and descriptive language. When contemplating his impending death, Oroonoko asserts, “To die is preferable to enduring a life of disgrace.”^{1(p.76)} This moment encapsulates the deep dignity he retains, even in misery. Behn's storytelling techniques enhance the emotional resonance of these moments, fostering empathy for Oroonoko's suffering and cultivating a sense

of revolutionary awareness.

By anchoring resistance in specific narrative moments—particularly the revolt and its tragic aftermath—Behn exposes both the power and the limits of revolutionary defiance under colonial rule. The novel's narrative structure ultimately refuses a triumphant resolution, insisting instead on tragedy as the only possible outcome within an unjust system. This refusal constitutes one of *Oroonoko*'s most radical gestures, compelling readers to confront the moral bankruptcy of colonial authority. Behn's evocative language and imagery elevate *Oroonoko* as a character deserving of dignity and respect. Her narrative acts as a form of defiance, shaping *Oroonoko*'s identity and empowering him to articulate his struggle against oppression. Furthermore, Behn's narrative techniques amplify the text's revolutionary essence, compelling readers to critically confront the ethical complexities of colonialism. Ultimately, *Oroonoko* is an essential work that urges us to confront the legacy of slavery and the ongoing quest for autonomy and justice.

6. Reception and legacy: Evolution of postcolonial readings of *Oroonoko*

Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* has undergone a significant transformation in its critical reception and interpretation, particularly within the realm of postcolonial studies. Initially praised for its narrative style and its alignment with the noble savage trope, the novel depicted *Oroonoko* as a tragic hero, emphasizing the horrors of slavery. In the 18th century, early readers approached the text predominantly through Enlightenment principles, celebrating themes of reason, dignity, and individualism.

However, the rise of postcolonial studies in the late 20th century prompted a reevaluation of Behn's portrayal of colonial themes and the complexities within her narrative. Scholars began to analyze *Oroonoko* as a manifestation of colonial ideology, revealing how Behn both contested and reinforced the power dynamics of her time. Thinkers like Edward Said¹⁶ and Homi K. Bhabha⁷ examined the implications of Behn's depictions of race and power, highlighting the complexities of her stance on colonialism. While Behn portrays *Oroonoko* as a sympathetic noble figure, she simultaneously engages with the language that dehumanizes him, thereby perpetuating colonial hierarchies.

This dualism in Behn's narrative has sparked various interpretations in postcolonial discourse. Some scholars, such as Ashcroft *et al.*¹⁷ argue that *Oroonoko* serves as a critique of colonialism and an early affirmation of the humanity of enslaved individuals, positioning the novel as a precursor to later abolitionist literature. They assert

that *Oroonoko*'s tragic decision to choose death over enslavement embodies a form of resistance that resonates with anti-colonial sentiments, underscoring Behn's revolutionary ethos and her role as an early feminist and anti-slavery advocate.

Conversely, critics like Laura C. Berry¹⁸ caution against reading *Oroonoko* solely as a progressive narrative. They argue that Behn's idealized portrayals of *Oroonoko* and Imoinda may obscure the harsh realities of slavery, thereby sustaining a colonial narrative that exoticizes and marginalizes Black identities. This critical perspective encourages readers to scrutinize the ramifications of Behn's narrative choices and the historical context that shapes them.

Oroonoko remains a focal point in contemporary academic discussions surrounding race, gender, and colonial authority. The novel's legacy encompasses both resistance to and complicity in colonial ideals. This ongoing discourse has deepened our understanding of Behn's work, illustrating how literature can both interrogate and uphold dominant cultural narratives.

The reception of *Oroonoko* has evolved significantly over the centuries, reflecting broader transformations in cultural and literary criticism. Postcolonial analyses of the novel continue to develop, revealing the intricacies of identity, power, and resistance, thereby affirming Behn's importance in literary and historical dialogues. The legacy of *Oroonoko* is one of continual reinterpretation, compelling readers to confront the complex interconnections among literature, colonialism, and social justice.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Oroonoko* serves as a potent framework for examining the intricacies of identity, autonomy, and resistance within colonial contexts. Behn's complex narrative intertwines themes of rebellion and longing, presenting *Oroonoko* as both a tragic protagonist and a symbol of revolutionary fervor. The novel's enduring influence on postcolonial studies stems from its ability to condemn colonialism while exposing its intrinsic inconsistencies. Behn's portrayal of *Oroonoko* compels readers to grapple with the ethical complexities surrounding power and privilege, transforming his struggle into a universal reflection on the human condition.

Ultimately, the convergence of defiance, desire, and revolution in Behn's work invites us to reflect on our own narratives of struggle against oppression, prompting a reevaluation of the legacies of colonialism and the persistent pathways to liberation. This complexity fosters ongoing discourse about the stories we choose to tell and

the histories we opt to remember, instilling a profound understanding of the forces that shape our present and future. Behn's perspective underscores that the quest for autonomy and justice is an enduring endeavor, resonating within the hearts of those who dare to resist.

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Conflict of interest

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Author contributions

This is a single-authored paper.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study is based on textual analysis of published literary works and does not involve human participants or personal data. Ethical approval was therefore not required.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Availability of data

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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