Exploring the Intersection of Race, Gender and Colonialism in 18th-century Literature: A Comparative Analysis of Aphra Behn and Mary Rowlandson

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Both Aphra Behn's "Oroonoko"[1] and Mary Rowlandson's " A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson"[2] are important captivity narratives from the 18th-century that offer overlapping and unique insights into concepts of race, gender and colonialism during their time. "Oroonoko" details the - allegedly true- story of a black prince who is captured and enslaved in Surinam. Rowlandson's captivity narrative focuses on the author's experience of being captured by Indigenous people and how she was delivered and restored through the work of God. Both Behn and Rowlandson were women authors in a time when this was an unlikely profession for them, and this allows us to glean certain notions of gender dynamics from their works. However, both authors were white, and this limits our understanding of the interplay between race and colonialism to a white perspective. Both Behn and Rowlandson's texts use language and character portrayal in ways that presuppose notions of race, gender and colonialism and, by analyzing these texts one can surmise the ways in which they reflect and contribute to the historical and cultural contexts of the time.

In her work "Oroonoko", Behn attempts to portray both Oroonoko and Imoinda with a complexity and nuance that was unlikely in her time. On Oroonoko, Behn states that: "He had an extreme good and graceful Mien, and all the Civility of a well-bred Great Man. He had nothing of Barbarity in his Nature, but in all Points address'd himself as if his Education had been in some European Court."[3] Behn places a heavy focus on Oroonoko's civility and education, and she does this as well when she describes Imoinda: "the Beauty of this fair Queen of Night, whose Face and Person were so exceeding all he had ever beheld … the Sweetness of her Words and Behaviour".[4] While Behn's portrayal of black characters attempts to be

[1] Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko: or, The Royal Slave*, (1688), 1-69.
[2] Mary Rowlandson, *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, (1682), 1-48.
[3] Behn, *Oroonoko*, 15-16.
[4] Behn, *Oroonoko* 17.

sympathetic, it also emphasizes that Oroonoko and Imoinda are tragic figures because they are exceptions to the rule, rather than representative of Black people as a whole. These notions of civility vs barbarity reinforce Eurocentric ideals that fed colonialism. Ramesh Mallipeddi states that Behn has created a paradox in which Oroonoko is not a tragic figure because he loses his autonomy but rather because he is a *prince* who loses his autonomy: "But because Behn's sympathy is largely reserved for the indignity endured by an aristocratic prince, and not necessarily for the suffering of a multitude of other Africans, the workings of sympathy in the novella appear paradoxical."[5] That is to say, the sympathies in the text seem to focus primarily on the royal body and not necessarily *all* black bodies, and this is highlighted by Behn's focus on civility and nobility.

In addition to this, there are a few passages in her text where Behn emphasizes the difference between black and white bodies, many of which create racial dichotomies between the two and imply a sense of superiority of whiteness. For example, she describes Oroonoko's features as being impossibly European, and this conveys that African features are less than: "His Nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat: His Mouth the finest shaped that could be seen; far from those great turn'd Lips, which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes."[6] While Behn's work appears, on the surface, to be sympathetic to colonialism and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, passages like this reinforce Eurocentric ideals of whiteness and beauty which are a staple of colonialism. Through her description of blackness, Behn reveals the ways in which physical and racial differences contribute to the cultural hierarchies that are maintained through colonialism.

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[5] Ramesh, Mallipeddi, "Spectacle, Spectatorship, and Sympathy in Aphra Behn's "Oroonoko," *Eighteenth-Century Studies,* 45, no. 4 (2012): 476.
[6] Behn, *Oroonoko,* 16.

If we are to analyze how Behn's text offers insight into Eurocentric and colonial ideals of the 18th-century, we must also look at the ways in which women are portrayed. In many ways, Behn reinforces Eurocentric ideas of male superiority in the way she describes Imoinda's nobility versus Oroonoko's. In contrast to Oroonoko - who is described as well-built, educated, civil and intelligent - Imoinda is described in terms of her beauty: "the Beauty of this fair Queen of Night, whose Face and Person were so exceeding all he had ever beheld,"[7] and "the beautiful Black Venus to our young Mars."[8] In contrast to this, however, Behn emphasizes the strength and resilience of black women later in the text. When Oroonoko is tortured by the plantation owner, the female slaves band together to nurse him back to health despite the risk of punishment: "and we took Care to have him put immediately into a healing Bath, to rid him of his Pepper, and ordered a Chirurgeon to anoint him with healing Balm."[9] Behn's depiction of the female slaves as healers does allow them some agency and resilience in the face of adversity, and it draws on their knowledge of traditional herbal remedies. This, in some small way, challenges Eurocentric notions of female inferiority as well as the cultural inferiority of women healers.

Colonialism, through the lens of Behn's novella, is depicted through brutality, violence and the commodification of black bodies. On the surface, it might appear as a sympathetic condemnation of the slave trade. However, in Mallipeddi's article, he links Behn's exotification of Oroonoko's body to a long history of the spectacularization of blackness: " … whereas the second is always a spectacle … this reversal must be read in terms of the black bodies imbrication of new ideologies of empire on the one hand, and with the commodity form on the other."[10] By appealing to European sentiments of exoticism and spectacle to allow room for

[7] Behn, *Oroonoko,* 17.
[8] Behn, *Oroonoko,* 17.
[9] Behn, *Oroonoko,* 63.
[10] Mallipeddi, "Spectacle, Spectatorship, and Sympathy," 483.

slave-trade sympathies, Behn creates a paradox in which she denounces and reinforces the commodification of black bodies. However, Behn offers us a unique insight into colonialism through this concept. Is the spectacularization of blackness part of an empirical and mercantilist ideology that fed into colonialism?

Further, we can view 18th-century colonialism through Behn's portrayal of indigenous peoples. At the onset of her novella, Behn describes the colonization of the America's as mutually beneficial and peaceful: "for those we live with in perfect Amity, without daring to command 'em; but, on the contrary, caress 'em with all the brotherly and friendly Affection in the World; trading with them for their Fish, Venison, Buffaloes Skins, and little Rarities."[11] We know from a modern historical understanding that this was certainly not always the case, and we might view this passage as a reinforcement of colonialism and Eurocentrism: colonialism is *good*. Additionally, Behn reinforces many stereotypes about indigenous peoples, such as their "barbarity", and she attempts to infantilize their culture which posits it as inferior or less advanced than European culture: "And these People represented to me an absolute Idea of the first State of Innocence, before Man knew how to sin: And 'tis most evident and plain, that simple Nature is the most harmless, inoffensive and virtuous Mistress."[12] Behn does this through the lens of being admirable or sympathetic, but nonetheless it reinforces Eurocentrism and colonial ideals. Mallipeddi, as discussed earlier, links this exotification of foreign cultures to the empirical commodification of them.[13] We can see this in Behn's text, as she states that European settlers needed indigenous people to navigate the land for them: "With these People, as I said, we

[11] Behn, *Oroonoko,* 11.
[12] Behn, *Oroonoko,* 13.
[13] Mallipeddi, "Spectacle, Spectatorship, and Sympathy," 479.

live in perfect Tranquillity, and good Understanding, as it behoves us to do; they knowing all the Places where to seek the best Food of the Country, and the Means of getting it."[14]

If one were to view Behn's description of indigenous peoples as sympathetic - but also infantilizing - then Mary Rownlandson's text offers an inverse description, positing indigenous people as uncivil. In her account of her experience as a captive within an indigenous group, Rowlandson states: "I have been in the midst of those roaring Lions and Savage Bears, that feared neither God nor Man, nor the Devil".[15] The author places heavy emphasis on the lack of religion within this indigenous community, as well as their supposed "savagery". This line of thinking bolsters our modern understanding of European colonialist ideals, which viewed indigenous communities as "primitive" or "savage" and used this as a justification for the appropriation of their lands and resources. One could also view this ideology as a reflection of the Puritan ideas around race and gender, which saw indigenous people as a threat to the European social and religious order.

Rowlandson's text gives us many distinct examples of how gender might have been viewed in the 18th-century, specifically in this colonial American context. For example, throughout the narrative, Rowlandson's own identity as a woman is strongly centered around her piety and Puritanism. Rowlandson states: "It was a strange and amazing dispensation that the Lord should so afflict his precious Servant, and Hand-maid".[16] The use of terms like "servant" and "hand-maid" underscores her belief in divine providence, and also highlights her "worthiness" as a dutiful and pure woman of God. But in contrast to that, Rowlandson's position as an author - an authoritative voice - of her own experience was not a common sight in colonial America. Lisa Logans states: "His [Thomas Parker] association of her work with smell implies a

[14] Behn, *Oroonoko* 13.
[15] Rowlandson, *Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration,* 43.
[16] Rowlandson, *Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration,* 6.

connection between woman's corporeal body and the body of her text. Parker's comments invite us to associate women's writing with their sexual organs and perhaps other acts that are "beyond the custom."[17] While Rowlandson's text does center around themes of women's place within Christendom and Puritanism, her choice to write and publish her account was outside the parameters of her gender and was not well received.

Rowlandson's depiction of gender through an indigenous lens also follows these European and Christian ideas of indigenous culture, completely failing to capture the full scope of it. "...but they would not hearken to him, but knock'd him on the head, stripped him naked, and split open his Bowels."[18] In this passage, Rowlandson depicts the indigenous men as being violent and aggressive, reinforcing colonial ideas that indigenous men are dangerous and unpredictable. However, later in the narrative, Rowlandson claims that they had never harmed her: "and yet not one of them ever offered the least abuse or unchastity to me in word or action"[19] Logan states that this was for her own credit as a Puritan woman: "in order to validate her piety and chastity, Rowlandson must define the meaning of her experience or risk the interpretation of others, who might see her captivity … as divine justice for sins …"[20]

The indigenous women in the narrative are handled in a similar paradoxical way. On one hand, they are shown to embody the same gendered roles that Rowlandson would be familiar with: "There was a Squaw who spake to me to make a shirt for her Sannup; for which she gave me a piece of Bear."[21] Conversely, however, they are also depicted as violent by Rowlandson: "with that my Mistress rises up; and takes up a stick big enough to have killed me, and struck at

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[17] Lisa Logan, "Mary Rowlandson's Captivity and the "Place" of the Woman Subject," *Early American Literature*, 28, no. 3 (1993): 260.
[18] Rowlandson, *Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration*, 10.
[19] Rowlandson, *Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration,* 43.
[20] Logans, "Mary Rowlandson's Captivity," 263.
[21] Rowlandson, *Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration*, 22.

me with it".[22] Logan posits that Rowlandson's paradoxical depiction of indigeneity is a sort of "defiance", and Rowlandson begins to dismantle her own understandings of race, gender and colonialism: "... substantial evidence that Rowlandson ceases to view her captors in a strictly typological or white and non-white sense. She describes numerous social interactions that suggest her growing view of them as individuals …"[23] Rowlandson, similar to Behn, seems to attempt to present a somewhat sympathetic portrait of indigenous culture while still maintaining her devout Puritanism.

Behn's "Oroonoko" and Rowlandson's "A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson" offers paradoxical portrayals of race, gender and colonialism in the 18th-century. Behn attempts to create a sympathetic condemnation of the slave trade, but she focuses too heavily on the nobility and civility of Oroonoko, and her story reads more as a hero's journey rather than a true condemnation. Behn's emphasis on Oroonoko's impossibly European features seems to idealize white bodies while simultaneously making a spectacle of black bodies, which in turn reinforces ideas surrounding white superiority. Rowlandson's work reinforces harmful colonial ideas about the savage and barbarous nature of indigenous peoples while presenting Puritanism as the ideal way to live. However, throughout her text, Rowlandson seems to grow fond of her captors and begins to view them as individual people rather than an amalgamation. Given the time frame for each of these texts, as well as the gender of the authors who wrote them, there are a series of small defiances that seem to challenge the racial, religious and gendered norms. These "paradoxes" that exist in each story are a product of the social and political landscape of the 18th century. Both Behn and Rowlandson's text attempt to offer a sympathetic depiction of cultural groups that were vulnerable under colonialism, however, those

[22] Rowlandson, *Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration,* 28.
[23] Logan, "Mary Rowlandson's Captivity," 270.

sympathies were heavily restricted due to their gender and socio-political backgrounds. Ultimately, both texts offer deep insights into the complex intersection of race, gender, religion, colonialism and literature during this period. By analyzing the ways these issues are depicted in these texts, we can glean a better understanding of the social and political contexts that shaped them during the long 18th century.

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