‘Otherness’ in Aphra Behn’s Oroonoko: A postcolonial Theory

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ABSTRACT

The present research paper focuses on the theoretical concept of ‘Otherness’, in particular, racial otherness, which concerned with identity and its representation in the perspective of postcolonial theory in Aphra Behn’s Oroonoko, or, the Royal Slave. The paper aims at how the protagonist, Oroonoko, in the chosen text loses his identity through racial otherness. It is claimed in this study that even though the author, who did not have the same nationality, ethnicity, race and social class background with the marginalized groups of characters in the fictional world that she created in her literary text and she wanted to protect them from the harsh treatment of the colonizers, she failed in in presenting them as positive figures because of their being viewed as ‘Other’ by colonizers who had more authority and power in terms of financially, physically, and politically in the society that they lived in. This study concludes that while the author wanted to make Blacks equal to Whites by Europeanizing the Black Prince, she distorted his culture and made him lose his identity.
1.0 INTRODUCTION

It is apparent that during the seventeenth century, the British Empire took over almost all parts of the world. British domination and colonization at that time had a massive impact on social, political, economic and cultural aspects of the countries they invaded. This invasion led to the emergence of a group of oppressed and inferior people. As a result, the marginalized groups were reduced and controlled by the one and only official dominant authority of the same historical contexts. Not only this, but such kind of treatment also gave an inaccurate portrayal of marginalized groups in every genre of literature; in particular, in novels by authors. During this time period, almost all novelists tried to include marginalized figures like Blacks in their literary works intentionally. This was because of their awareness of and ideas about the concept of ‘Otherness’ in their society. Needless to say, Aphra Behn was a noticeable female author in the Renaissance, a period that suffered from racial issues related to social actions such as ‘Otherness’, to mention only one. She used her fictional work to bring attention to the subtle above mentioned issue.

Based on this, in this research paper, Aphra Behn’s narrative fiction Oroonoko (1688) has been chosen, in which the long history of British colonization and black people’s slavery as historical contexts are the basis of the chosen literary work. In this paper, one of the most powerful and influential key terms of postcolonial theory will be examined, ‘Otherness’. The protagonist male figure will be also examined as a subject to racial otherness. In what way does the writer criticize and present the treatment of Blacks as, a group and individuals by invaders? In order to argue this, it is helpful to define the concept of ‘Otherness’ in light of postcolonial theory, a point to be addressed later in this paper. The aim of this paper is to discuss how the mental description and physical appearance of the main character, Oroonoko, refers to racial otherness, through which he loses his identity.

2.0 CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

To understand Behn’s work and her interest in the representation of ‘Otherness’, it would be helpful to look at both the author’s and the historical background. The inappropriate depiction of colonized peoples in the majority forms of literature seems more likely to
give modern readers a sense of how Blacks were viewed and treated in Renaissance Period. Hence, it is helpful to look at the contextual aspect of the chosen text.

Throughout the Renaissance Period, the economic and political situations made the colonizer nation; like Britain to bring people from different backgrounds to places such as England and America, which brought about the depictions of the marginalized people. Indeed, the authors’ personal experiences and awareness of marginalized groups in their community make them depict the main characters in their works as ‘Other’ which means being different in any way from a group of people who do not belong to them and does not meet their customs. Indeed, the author was a daughter of a lieutenant, who accompanied her father on a trip to colonize and control non-European countries and peoples like the West Indies during her lifetime. Through her trip, she saw how the dominate people looked at powerless people negatively and abused them. Indeed, Behn’s trip seems to record a good event in her life because the incident of this trip is the basis of her famous novel, Oroonoko.

Hence, the selected literary text is set in three locations to represent what was going on in these cities at the time; they are London, Surinam, and Coramantein. During that time period, after the colonization of Surinam by English traders; black people were brought as slaves from different places like Africa, West India and, Coramantein to Surinam to work on the plantation fields. Additionally, these slaves were looked at as objects and did not have any legal rights under colonial laws. Therefore, most of the slaves lost their identity and intended to escape when they found a suitable chance.

3-0 OTHERNESS IN POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

It seems that Behn’s chosen text deals heavily with issues of race, identity, and power and describes the life of an African Prince slave in a colonized country; therefore, the novel has been looked at through postcolonial theory by recent scholars and critics. In particular, they have focused much attention on one of the most popular concepts of postcolonial theory, Otherness.

Based on this, it is important to give a clear definition of both the terms ‘Postcolonial theory’ and ‘Otherness’ in order to make the purpose of this paper more comprehensible.
Datta G. Sawant (2011, p.5) states, “Postcolonial theory addresses matters of identity, gender, race, racism and ethnicity with the challenges of how a colonized people’s knowledge about the world is generated under specific relations between the powerful and the powerless”. This definition clarifies how colonialism tried to put different parts of the world one under another, which means giving them a vertical relationship starts with the most powerful countries and ends with the most powerless ones. As a result, this kind of relationship led to creating different types of postcolonial issues as the above-mentioned definition has provided.

While, the term ‘Otherness’ has been defined by one of the most important figures in postcolonial theory, Frantz Fanon (1963, p. 65) as follows: “Other is the not me”. Taking this definition further, s/he may well be described as a foreigner, which means s/he is different from a group of people in terms of custom, language and, identity. Indeed, this person is usually considered inferior to the point of being not fully a human by colonizers, who looked at themselves as ‘Self’. In addition, as Lois Tyson (2005, p. 420) mentions that the pronoun them is used to describe such kind of person in postcolonial writings, which usually implies savage, evil and uncivilized. Thus, such kind of person will be viewed as improper, uncanny and unfamiliar by colonizers.

Needless to say, because the concept of ‘Otherness’ belongs to the term of ‘Postcolonial Identity’ and it is the major concern of this paper; it would be very useful and crucial to provide a simple definition to the latter term, too. Lois Tyson (2006, p. 419) defines postcolonial identity this way: “It is the inculcation of a British education and culture that denigrate the culture, morals, and even physical appearance of subjected peoples. Thus, the colonials were left with an alienation from their own indigenous cultures”. Tyson’s definition indicates that the natives (Blacks) had an alienation and negative self-image towards their own cultures and identities after colonization. As a result, they lost their identity. In this way, it can be said that the way of colonizers’ treatment towards natives resulted in distorting and losing the natives’ identity.

4.0 TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Oroonoko; or, the Royal Slave is -the work of the female English author Behn-written for the English readers in the seventeenth century when society was not racially segregated. In her work, Behn intends to portrait the Black African prince through his
skin-color (race) for making the representation of racial otherness clearer. Of course, the difference between the author’s skin-color and the prince’s makes the author’s attitudes and feelings toward the racially categorized ‘Other’ ambiguous and uncertain. This uncertainty leads the main character to have an alien feeling towards himself and then lose his identity. Indeed, it can be said that the postcolonial notion of the ‘Other’ by itself is complex, and Behn’s deployment of it in her literary work is even more because of the author’s being different in terms of race and class, to mention only two, with the main character of the novel.

The British Empire used to impose the concept of ‘Otherness’ on any places that they colonized at the time Behn produced her novel. According to Tsai-Hua Yang (2005, p. 267), Oroonoko is “the narration of the colonized ‘Other’ during the growth of The British Empire”. This quotation explicitly portrays author’s attempt to raise the concept of ‘Otherness’ and how she imposes it very clearly in the very beginning of her selected text by using the pronoun ‘them’ to talk about Blacks and the pronoun ‘us’ to describe Whites. As Zahid Iqbal and Munawar Iqbal Ahmed (2014, p. 934) point out, “this imposition ultimately results in the solid division of the world in the form of ‘us’ and ‘them’”. This quote draws attention to the fact of the world during Behn’s time was very unjust for Blacks and they were separated from the superior race, European because of their complexion.

Even though the author gives positive descriptions to natives (Blacks) by using words like ‘modest’, ‘bashful’ and ‘very shy’, she still does not want to describe them equally to Whites. This is, on the one hand, because of the inhuman and degrading treatment of Whites towards Blacks, who were looked at as slaves. In other words, she wants to criticize colonizers the way they treated Blacks. On the other hand, the different use of the above-mentioned pronouns depicts the natives as ‘Others’. Needless to say, because the hero of Behn’s literary work is an African Prince, which means he belongs to black people; he is also regarded as ‘Other’ by the Europeans. As Raúl Vázques (2014, p. 3) states “she (Behn) presents her protagonist as an Other who meets the tragic fate because of the color of his skin”. This exemplifies Behn’s representation of Prince Oroonoko as ‘Other’ because of his skin colour which makes the reader look at black colour as being a racial signifier.
In the light of this explanation, it can be said that the novel addresses the issue of ‘Otherness’; in particular, ‘racial otherness’ which the author highlights very obviously through the physical beauty of Oroonoko. When the writer describes her hero, she wants to give him a European beauty. Importantly, it is interesting to note that it seems that she unconsciously uses the phrase ‘perfect ebony’ throughout the main character’s physical description. Considering Behn’s description to Oroonoko, not only the word ‘ebony’ which means a deep, dark black color could be noticed, but also the adjective word, which is used for emphasis, like ‘perfect’ could be seen. By using these words, the reader is told that the hero is a black-skinned person and has a different skin color from the Europeans. As Hanne Thyvaert (2015, p.14) comments, “[a] black skin color is the evident sign of racial difference”. This quote implies that the issue of ‘racial otherness’ is regarded as the central issue in this text and its protagonist is looked at and treated differently because of his race.

Accordingly, it may be said that physical beauty is one of the aspects that Behn focuses on in her chosen novel to depict the concept of racial otherness. Indeed, the novel is based around the time when the author was staying in Surinam and waiting to go back home to (England) when she met the enslaved Black prince and he tells her his story of being a slave. The author presents the protagonist of her novel, Oroonoko, as an ideal character and describes him by his stunning beauty. The first time when Behn sees Oroonoko, she gives him a remarkable description by saying: “[h]is face was not that of brown, rusty Black which most of that Nation are, but a perfect Ebony […] His nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat. His mouth, the finest shap’d that cou’d be seen, far from those great turn’d Lips” (Oroonoko, p.13-14). In this quotation, Behn’s description is far from realistic because she gives Oroonoko European beauty and features. According to Bert Van Troos (2013, p.48), “[s]he (Behn) de-Africanizes Oroonoko, by praising his good ‘European’ characteristics and specifying the non-African nature of his physical attractiveness”. Indeed, what Behn tries to do here is to represent Oroonoko as someone who is very familiar and good-looking because Europeans used to give themselves good characteristics to separate themselves from indigenous peoples. Giving the European features to Oroonoko makes the author devalue Oroonoko’s African characteristics. Tsai-Hua Yang (2005, p.267) views Behn’s description of Oroonoko “as a Europeanized Other”.

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This clarifies that Oroonoko’s representation is much more like an unrealistic Europeanized figure, rather than a typical Black African person. In this case, it seems that Behn wants to remove what so-called ‘racial’ otherness from Oroonoko.

I do not deny that Behn’s description of Oroonoko is not exaggerated, but I think she does it because she wants to break the obstacle of ‘racial Otherness’ between Whites and Blacks and also to abolish slavery because of Europeans’ cruel treatment. This is because in the seventeenth century many Europeans regarded blackness as a physical flaw; so this makes Behn to be considered a racist.

To put it simply, when the narrator consciously Europeanizes Oroonoko, she is trying to distinguish or separate him from ordinary Black slaves. As a result of this, she dehumanizes these slaves who live with Oroonoko in Surinam and humanizes Oroonoko. Lois Tyson (2006, p.420) interprets Behn’s Europeanization of Oroonoko as follows: “[t]he colonizers saw themselves as the embodiment of what a human being should be […] native peoples were considered […] inferior to the point of being less than fully human”. In my own mind, in this point, Behn’s message is that she aims to tell and illustrate to English readers that Oroonoko is also a human being like ‘us’ Whites or Europeans, but in different skin color.

In addition, I believe that what makes Behn use this exaggeration and unrealistic description of Oroonoko is because of her White cultural standards during that era. As Maureen Duffy remarks that in order for Oroonoko to be regarded as a powerful prince or hero, he must have the characteristics of a dominant (European) personality (Duffy: 1986). In opposition to Duffy’s speech, Mary Louise Pratt (1985, p. 121) comments on Behn’s detailed European characterization of Oroonoko by saying that “Oroonoko’s Europeanization is a reductive normalizing”. Taking Pratt’s point into account, because Europeans were regarded as normal people in society in the seventeenth century, Behn reduces the value of European by Europeanized Oroonoko. Anne Forgatty (1994, p. 12) supports this point when she says “the more she (Behn) endeavors to erase Oroonoko’s difference, the more prominent he becomes”. In fact, it sounds that it would be impossible for Behn to change the Black prince’s skin-color in spite of her deliberate exaggeration of Oroonoko’s European description.
This is because as Tsai-Hua Yang (2005, p.267) states that Behn’s description of Oroonoko is “a Europeanized Other”, which means this unrealistic description will not give Oroonoko a typical European character.

Indeed, the main purpose behind Behn’s giving these decent European features to the protagonist is to present him as a positive figure and equally to Whites, but it seems that she fails in such kind of representation. Maria-Irina Popescu (2011, p.4) looks at “Oroonoko’s strict racial difference as Oroonoko’s annihilation”. This quote implies that this description will destroy Oroonoko’s identity completely because he has been transformed in a very unrealistic way and has been given several features which are quite opposite to his own identity. According to Fereshteh Zangenehpour (cited in Thyvaert: 2015, 15), “Oroonoko is and remains an African prince, but he has adopted several European features, both externally and internally. This is what places him both inside and outside the African culture”. Zangenehpour’s speech indicates that Oroonoko cannot have a specific culture and identity because of the adoption of European features. Consequently, he would be an ambiguous and uncertain character racially and would be alienated from his own culture as well as would lose his identity.

Moreover, in her travel narrative fiction, Behn refers to or uses three different places such as Africa, England and Surinam by taking their cultural aspects into consideration. For example, Africans and indigenous people of Surinam, in terms of culture, were concentrated on their social codes like honor and humanity. Bert Van Troos (2013, p. 48) states that “[b]y associating Africans with simpleness and innocence she (Behn) devalues African culture”, which means they were looked at as not fully human. On the contrary, English people were interested in power and status quo in which Whites occupied the top place in society. Lois Tyson (2006, p.419) comments on the cultural issue of the colonized countries as follows: “The colonizers believed that only their Anglo-European culture was civilized, sophisticated, or, as postcolonial critics put it, metropolitan. Therefore, native peoples were defined as savage, backward and undeveloped”. Taking Tyson’s argument into account, the reader should be expected to see Oroonoko as an ignorant, illiterate and violent person because of his being nonwhite. On the contrary, Oroonoko is introduced as a Black Prince, who used to do things his way and this led him to have a confident personality throughout the text.
Interestingly, Behn describes him in this way in the following sentence: “This great and just Character of Oroonoko gave me an extreme Curiosity to see him, especially when I knew he spoke French and English, and that I could talk with him” (Oroonoko, p. 7). In this quotation, Behn intentionally wants to draw the readers’ attention to Oroonoko’s mental attractiveness by stating that the Black African prince of her text is an educated, civilized, and intellectual person. This is, actually, because she wants to make him equal to Europeans and remove his status as an ‘Other’.

In fact, because Oroonoko have been tricked and taken to Surinam as a slave; his freedom and culture has been restricted. Therefore, his good European features have not lasted throughout the story. Near the end of the story, when he rebels against Whites to get his freedom back; he has been equivalent to Africans by presenting him as savage and villain. As Zahid Iqbal and Munawar Iqbal Ahmed (2014, p. 935) comment on such kind of presentation as “[t]hough the narrator wants to reduce her hero’s ‘otherness’ by domesticating him, she is actually involved in the process of distorting his (Oroonoko’s) native and domestic African identity” Lois Tyson (2006, p.420) also comments on the identity of Oroonoko as follows: “sometimes the “savage” is perceived as possessing a “primitive” beauty or nobility born of a closeness to nature (the exotic other)”. Taking these comments further, it can be said that through these ‘exotic other’ and ‘distorting identity’, it would be impossible for Oroonoko to be looked at as a European person. Not only this, but he also loses his real identity as African Black prince.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This essay has attempted to explain one of the most important terms of postcolonial theory, ‘Otherness’ in general and its prominent category, ‘racial otherness’ in particular in the shortest novel in English Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave. Behn has explored the cultures of both the dominant people and the inferior people and how the former abused and looked down on the latter during colonization time. Behn, as one of the seventeenth-century authors, has also emphasized ‘blackness’ as a racial marker of African slavery; therefore, she Europeanized Oroonoko and gave him a decent European physical beauty and mental attractiveness. This paper has also examined how Behn has tried to show Oroonoko, the hero of the novel, as a White person in order to tell colonizers that Blacks are also humans like them and they have to be treated well and be equal to them, but she has failed in that attempt.
Not only she has failed in presenting the African Black prince as a positive figure, but she also has distorted his culture and made him lose his identity through these transformations that she did for him.

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