

Oroonoko: An Analysis of Treason in Behn's Anglo-African Sojourn

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ABSTRACT

Human history rests on specific traits of life. Out of these, 'trust' is counted as the most endeared, expensive, difficult to maintain as well as effervescent in nature. The phrase 'Time once gone, never comes back' takes us to an equally sensitive world of moral decorum where 'trust once lost is seldom or never restored'. The paper is a partial attempt to analyse the element of betrayal ranging from familial ties to the national ones. Interestingly, the protagonist is both the subject and the object of treason and his fate is a recoil action of his own past deeds which never occurred to his ownself as ugly and inhuman. His kaleidoscopic life-events are the best whiplashes to remind him of his past actions and teach him the intensity of the pain of separation from one's own loved ones and one's own land.

Keywords: *Treason, Betray, Serpent, Colonisers, Auction, Slave.*

Introduction:

Every oscillatory movement of imperialist history has witnessed treason on the part of the natives. The marketing strategies of the West have always been successful in overcoming the moral as well as the patriotic spirit of the inhabitants. In fact, treason is no less than a demonic power that can dismantle the strongest pillars of trust among the people who belong to any specific place. It has a kind of serpentine-Satanic-lure in itself which drives a belonging member to leak the inmost sensitive secrets of his own comrades or country.

Traitors have been so rampant all through the epochs of history that there is hardly a nation or community or even a house where invasions, battles or disputes crop out without there being a traitor's hand in them. Even a fortress can seldom be demolished in a day or night but with someone inside it supporting the outsiders.

Since time immemorial, every era has lamented the existence of traitors, deducting whom, houses and familial ties would never have been broken, friendship would never have been betrayed, communities would not have experienced breakdown and the mighty empires under legendary rulers would not have seen their downfall. While enemies and spies mostly probe our secrets and weak points to put us at check in case we go too far with our cunning policies, if any, traitors are a class which belong to us and instead of safeguarding our and their unified interests, go as far as shaking hands with our and at the same their enemy, first to destroy us and then themselves. After satisfying their selfish interests, the outsiders can never trust an inhabitant turned traitor who could not respect his own blood, race, gender or countrymen. When the game is over, the traitor either meets the same end as his own countrymen or is destined to become a puppet in the hands of his enemies.

Treason has no specific religion, face, colour, or gender. It comes with a snake-like-glide and manipulates the matter with the cunningness of a fox. It has no self-respect, no sense of belongingness; just a fishy nature, poor moral character and a slimy attitude. History has witnessed traitors letting enemies into their own land, harbouring them as guests, hurting their own moral ethics in hope of acquiring some money and the so-called privilege. These fake friends creep deep into the land, arrest the inhabitants' emotions and psyche, take advantage of the internal trivial disputes and suddenly one day become the rulers, thereby the concept of imperialism and colonisation. In almost all the commonwealth countries, the first encounter was obviously violent and the natives met the outsiders with primitive as well as outdated weaponry. As a result, chunks of land were gradually occupied by the imperialists and the natives initially fought but eventually surrendered, not being able to meet the innovative weapons and ferocious spirit of the colonisers. Mostly the inhabitants ended up nurturing deep grudge for their enemies but some gave in, attracted by the nominal favours promised by the attackers. Of all the commonwealth countries, Africa witnessed the most horrendous fate of its natives where millions were plucked out mercilessly from their motherland, transported in slave-ships in conditions worse than those of mishandled

commodities and 'sold (auctioned) as wailing animals' in the 17th century American rustic auctioneering markets 'to grow cotton in the plantations and subscribed to christianity'. In Africa, 'venturing deep' inside the equatorial forests for 'seeking out just the right villages' where young blooming hot-blood would be available and worth capturing, was almost impossible for the foreign attackers. Certainly, some traitors or 'unscrupulous slave hunters' were at work. In the same way, more or less similar strategy must have been applied in other colonised lands such as India and Australia.

History, in one form or the other, has depicted images and cited fictitious examples from real events in concerned pieces of land. Art crafts such as domes, architecture, painting or written manuscripts take us back to the pre-independence time of the commonwealth countries when even the egoist rulers served the British or the French colonisers. Piles of literary work in shape of novels, short stories and even poems hold for us in store the depiction of sadistic nature of colonisers invading the native material, dignity, mind, spirit and values and crushing these under their feet.

Basically all colonisers have been synonymous with high profile dacoits who looted the traditionally prosperous places and treated them as chop-chop markets where even the insignificant soldiers had right to rob the defeated natives of their valuables and even common things such as swords, knives and armours of the dead in the battle. British and American youth boarded ships heading for the commonwealth countries with an intention to come back as terribly rich leviathans and which they did by stepping over the corpses of the natives and their national integrity. Moreover, this Herculean task was never accomplished without the collaboration of some cursed native souls who sold out their own brethren as well as nationalism for some cowries (shillings/cents).

Some writers have portrayed the above mentioned disloyal attitude in such a way, in their master pieces, that the very description leaves the eyes tearful and a heart choked with grief. In this paper, the author will analyse the efforts of a 17th century novelist who tirelessly attempts to evoke the shameful feelings for treacherous deeds of the traitors.

Behn's Oroonoko – A Boomerang of Treason:

The crown prince of Abyssinia, the heart-throb of the kingdom, the only heir of the state, the terror of local wars is a very gallant warrior and Behn's pen knows no limits when it floats endlessly singing praises of this youthful moor, Oroonoko. This future king of the country of the blacks has been brought up just the way the Indian kings and princes were, during the British rule in India. Oroonoko is tutored by the European instructors; he mingles freely with the European traders whose range of business varies from needles and combs to animals and human beings whereas in the battlefield he is a typical native African warrior but once any local war ends and Oroonoko is back home, his celebrations and flaunts of splendour are well known among the British slave traders who shamelessly demand their share from the war exploits and the prisoners-of-war from the overwhelmed victorious Oroonoko in lieu of a modest amount of money or some European products:

Coramantien, a country of blacks so called, was one of those places in which they found the most advantageous trading for these slaves, and thither most of our great traders in that merchandise traffic; for that nation is very warlike and brave: and having a continual campaign, being always in hostility with one neighbouring prince or other, they had the fortune to take a great many captives; for all they took in battle were sold as slaves; at least those common men who could not ransom themselves. Of these slaves so taken, the general only has all the profit; and of these generals our captains and masters of ships buy all their freights.(Oroonoko: The Royal Slave)

The 17th century author, Aphra Behn seems to be well aware of the European mind-set towards the outsiders and she frankly acknowledges the strategies that the colonisers implement and take advantage of.

Oroonoko is a story of barbaric nature, of the undeveloped mind of the colonised people, limited understanding, lack of foresight and a useless satisfaction in getting fake respect by the friends slowly turning into enemies. For instance, Oroonoko's grandfather (the present king) is an ancient man of 100 years and has plenty of old and young beautiful black wives. Of all the gallant sons he begot, none is left to life. Therefore, his immediate successor is his only grandson Oroonoko was given in

teaching of one of the oldest generals of African wars when he was a teenager. Under the old general, Oroonoko becomes an expert fighter, ferocious conqueror and the 'darling of the soldiers'. It so happens that during one of the battles, in the midst of the clouds of arrows, the old general, trying to save Oroonoko, bears a fatal wound of an arrow-shot in his eye and dies. Apparently, the victorious crown prince pays a respectable visit to the general's only daughter Imoinda and as a homage to her deceased father, he gifts her with 'one hundred and fifty slaves in fetters', a part of the fresh exploits of the respective battle. In no time, both are deeply impressed by elegance and beauty of each other and an unspeakable love is born between them. Once Oroonoko is back at royal palace, every festive corner echoes with the sounds of courtiers delivering reports of Imoinda's charm. Very soon, a second visit by Oroonoko witness manifolds of love commitments exchanged between the youthful moor and the maiden. Before the couple can enter into wedlock, certain ceremony has to be observed which involves the elders on the both sides. This time, the guardian on Oroonoko's side is the hundred years old monarch and therefore he is to be given the absolute authority to handle the matter.

On the other hand, this old wavering soul hardly needs any reports about the beauty and character of Imoinda to glide all over her anatomy in his imagination:

At this character, his old heart, like an extinguished brand, most apt to take fire, felt new sparks of love, and began to kindle; and now grown to his second childhood, longed with impatience to behold this gay thing, with whom, alas! He could but innocently play. (Oroonoko: The Royal Slave)

Before he confirms the extent of her beauty so as to call her to his private chamber he gets a courtier's report that she is about to be betrothed to the prince Oroonoko. Wasting no time, when the prince has gone for hunting, he sends the royal veil to Imoinda – invites her to honour her with his bed and to secure her for his own private use – the refusal of which means death for any maiden. Thus a pleading, tearful and wishing to resist Imoinda makes herself to suffer and to receive the caresses of the old king as he leads her into the richly prepared bath that he has ordered for this 'longed-for virgin'.

Any reader who is even partially aware of the native African semi-barbarism then, would not blame Behn for her description of the women's plight in Oroonoko's country. In those times, a man could have as many women as he could afford. With his women his sole job was to keep them 'turned on', not to abandon their intimate needs or subject them to shame. Behn regards these as 'virtues' when she compares them with the Christian countries 'where they prefer the bare name of religion; and, without virtue or morality, think that sufficient'. As far as the lusty old African monarch is concerned, he has secured for himself a large number of wives and concubines, the sight of whom is very hard to get because no males enter into the otan (dwelling for king's wives and mistresses) except when the king goes with his train of personal attendants to entertain himself with his wives or mistresses. This old African royal female dwelling is based on the hierarchy of the age and experience where loosening folds of skin are meant to teach the young flesh the arts of making love. No senior wife or mistress has any right to display her jealousy with the younger ones:

. . .the cast-mistresses of the old king; and 'twas these (now past their beauty) that were made guardians or governantes to the new and the young ones, and whose business it was to teach them all those wanton arts of love with which they prevailed and charmed heretofore in their turn. . .

(Oroonoko: The Royal Slave)

After much bawling at this personal conflict between a sense of respect for his grandfather and his rage at the possession of his lawful wife by the same grandfather, prince Oroonoko decides to exhibit some signs of slyness wherein he manages to show 'a face not at all betraying his heart' in the presence of the king. Soon he gets an opportunity to accompany the old king to his otan where he should get a chance to behold Imoinda and he does. He develops a soft corner in the heart of a former old wife of the king, Onahal who in turn sighs for Aboan, a close friend of Oroonoko. Onahal feels neglected now that she is past her beauty and youth. Somehow, Oroonoko and Aboan manage to make Onahal their confidante and a plan is laid that both Oroonoko and Aboan may creep into the otan through its orange groove, around midnight. So, both of them do as planned and each one gets his own chance with the appointed women, Imoinda and Onahal. Oroonoko is unaware of the king's spies who convey the course of

events to his majesty but by the time the otan is raided, it is early dawn and Oroonoko has already got the bliss of Imoinda's virginity and is more than satisfied at her 'spotless' character. He retires to his camp and then to the battlefield against some local tribe. The enraged king is reported by Imoinda and Onahal that Oroonoko 'unknown to her, had broke into her apartment, and ravished her'. The furious king is caught in a tug-of-war at the idea of Imoinda's been ravished, been polluted and thus unfit for his use and her royal veil which meant liable for none except his own royal self. Initially he wants to kill her or possess her but again touching a woman who has already slept with a man from the family is the greatest crime in nature but he cannot hand her over to his grandson either, after she has received the royal veil. So, he decides for both the women a fate worse than death 'with order they should be both sold off as slaves to another country, either Christian or heathen, 'twas no matter where'. After the order is put into execution, the king somewhat feels guilty and sends a word to Oroonoko in the battlefield that Imoinda has been put to death because he knows that 'he should never obtain his grandson's pardon for the other'.

Now here comes the typical twist in the story because Imoinda is to be shipped as a common slave to some other country similarly as thousands of those who have been shipped till now to the Christian countries after having been sold by the her lawful lord, Oroonoko. On the other hand, Oroonoko, in spite of his ultimate grief at the news of Imoinda's death, fights furiously in the battle field because he wants a dignified death and that also only once instead of dying thousand times a day out of melancholy and despair. He wins the battle with huge profits, both for sale and use, just like every other battle. After much persuasion on the part of his grandfather, he returns to the court where he is received with all 'joy and magnificence'. It so happens that as Oroonoko returns victorious from the war with an enormous body of slaves and prisoners and exploits, an English ship of one of Oroonoko's acquaintance arrives at Abyssinia's port, its captain's mouth watering for fresh slaves:

. . .there arrived in the port an English ship . . .The master of it had often before been in these countries, and was very well known to Oroonoko, with whom he had trafficked for slaves, and had used to do the same with his predecessors.

(Oroonoko: The Royal Slave)

It is evident from the captain's knowledge that he must have spent a major part of his life at sea, that he recognises the sea routes as the streets of his neighbourhood and has a wide familiarity with 'globes and maps'. The captain has a good compatibility with Oroonoko because the moor prince seems to him quite 'civilised', better bred and educated with a handsome degree of disloyalty towards his own race. For the captain, traitors like Oroonoko are the most profitable industries and quite apt for 'European mode':

To this captain he sold abundance of his slaves; and for the favor and esteem he had for him, made him many presents, and obliged him to stay at court as long as possibly he could. Which the captain seemed to take as a very great honor done him, entertaining the prince every day with globes and maps, and mathematical discourses and instruments; eating, drinking, hunting, and living with him with so much familiarity that it was not to be doubted but he had gained very greatly upon the heart of this gallant young man.

(Oroonoko, The Royal Slave)

The captain never leaves Oroonoko's side and gets so close to him that one can hardly say anything about the racial difference between them. The captain, used to such slyness extensively, with his snake-like treacherous eyes, never lets anybody doubt his future plans. As a return gift, he invites the youthful prince to 'honour his vessel' at dinner before they set sail which Oroonoko gladly accepts. Accompanied by his French instructor and a hundred gallant youth from his own race, Oroonoko is received by the captain with great pomp and show as two boats are arranged with carpets and cushions and musical band to entertain the prince and his train. The treat is splendid with all sorts of wine and best quality food. The prince, in a fit pleasure, gets over drunk and greatly admires the ship as he has never been to a sea voyage before. Taking advantage of his curious nature the captain shows him many rooms and places beneath the deck. Care is taken that the prince and his warriors should be separated from each other while beholding its various parts. Once the prince arrives at the lowest part of the vessel, he jumps down to inspect it and suddenly, without any warning, he is tightly bound in shackles in such a way that every limb is far apart from other. His men also

meet the same fate. It is such a perfectly laid plan that all the moors on board are captured at several places and almost at the same time:

. . .so that the captain, who had well laid his design before, gave the word, and seized on all his guests; they clapping great irons suddenly on the prince, when he was leaped down into the hold to view that part of the vessel; and locking him fast down, secured him. The same treachery was used to all the rest; and all in one instant, in several places of the ship, were lashed fast in irons, and betrayed to slavery.

(Oroonoko, The Royal Slave)

Once the plan is over, all the whites set sail with a new spirit and full vigour 'with as treacherous as fair a wind'. . . 'with this innocent and glorious prize'. Deep inside the vessel, Oroonoko is left to struggle with his fetters, first in rage then in vain. Due to the extreme management of the chains he does not even get an opportunity for any suicidal attempt. Ultimately, he resolves to starve himself to death. After many negotiations with the prince and a promise to let him set his foot on the very next land they would approach, the captain manages to convince the prince to break his resolution. The prince is freed of his chains, given somewhat a hospitable treatment and taken to his own people where he pacifies them and conveys the captain's message. The moors also start accepting the food as long as their attitude will account for their lord's freedom. Oroonoko, from then onwards, is treated well on board but most of the time he is melancholic because he thinks it a punishment as he left Imoinda alone to her fate in otan that night.

After a tedious journey, the moor prince is dropped at the colony of river Surinam and is sold (with seventeen slaves from other lot including women and children) to an overseer by the treacherous captain. Oroonoko's new owner, a Cornish gentleman Mr. Trefry takes a likeness for him. Oroonoko's name is changed to Caesar and with that name he is received at the plantation after a three days journey in a boat. His mannish elegance is cordially received and fate gives him a chance to behold the kind of slaves that he had sold in the past to these western parts of the world.

Through Mr. Trefry, Oroonoko comes to know about a beautiful Negro slave, Christened as Clemene, delivered to the plantation six months ago and has not accepted

any slave for a husband. She also refutes the advances of the Whites. Next morning Oroonoko is taken to Clemene's hut where to his greatest joy Clemene none other than Imoinda herself. Soon, both of them get married and embrace that slave plantation as their blessed universe. In a short time Imoinda conceives and Oroonoko becomes impatient for freedom. He begins to request Mr. Trefry to set him and Imoinda free in lieu of many slaves and gold from his own land as ransom but his request is delayed on some pretext or the other. In no time Oroonoko takes it as dishonesty and starts mistrusting the whites:

. . .and in a very short time after she conceived with child, which made Caesar even adore her, knowing he was the last of his great race. This new accident made him more impatient of liberty, and he was every day treating with Trefry for his and Clemene's liberty, and offered either gold or a vast quantity of slaves, which should be paid before they let him go, provided he could have any security that he should go when his ransom was paid. They fed him from day to day with promises, and delayed him till the Lord-Governor should come; so that he began to suspect them of falsehood, and that they would delay him till the time of his wife's delivery, and make a slave of that too: for all the breed is theirs to whom the parents belong.

(Oroonoko, The Royal Slave)

Knowing that the slaves adore him, the Whites begin to fear a mutiny and the security is raised to observers and spies who accompany Oroonoko at plantations lest he should 'stir the men's blood' to rebellion. Oroonoko is accompanied by white people more than ever and several diversions are arranged for him including hunting expeditions, fishing and visiting Red Indians' areas to diverge his attention. As the time passes, Imoinda's belly begins to show and she bemoans the captivity of her future family.

Aphra Behn's pen, even after mentioning Oroonoko's short comings as a warrior, leader, human being and an upcoming king, seldom stops to criticise him and she does it on purpose so that an evaluating eye could rebel and judge how tables were turned and the fortune had a different face, in store for Oroonoko, the moor prince. Once, Oroonoko also had a lot of slaves to serve him, he was the central figure for trafficking slaves to the western world never giving it a thought as to what would become of them at an

unknown land, the pain they experienced while being separated from their loved ones and the soil of their own land. He had never concerned himself with the idea that the hands that fought in any battle whether declared victorious or defeated, still did not give him any right to deprive them of their own birth land.

One Sunday when the whites are drunk more than the usual days, Oroonoko singles out around three hundred negro slaves excluding women and children and bellows with all his spirit to remind them of their quality as men and their lost freedom. Gradually his debate begins overpowering them and they agree to struggle for their families. Leaving their slave- town the same day, the Negroes make their way through the forest to the seashore where they expect to find a boat or a ship which could be overtaken by fighting.

It is not difficult to find these rustics in the forest by the signs they leave behind them; fire remains and chopped branches to clear their ways. A battle ensues with arrows, whips, clubs, knives and rusted guns in which the English easily overtake the moors and order them to surrender. All do except Oroonoko, Imoinda and another Negro, Tuscan. The Deputy Governor, enraged at this rebellion, seeks to avenge in a different way, so he negotiates with Oroonoko to return on his own terms and in the midst of heated exchanges between them, Mr. Trefry suggests that a contract should be signed for the same. This is done; all three are taken to their plantation where Imoinda is locked up in a house while Oroonoko and Tuscan are tied to several stakes and whipped in the most deplorable manner. Even the slaves are ordered to whip them and Oroonoko beholds his own race whipping him like a dog. After their lust for revenge is satisfied, to increase his pain manifold, Oroonoko's wounds are rubbed with Indian pepper.

When the author and some better friends go to see Oroonoko, they carry him to an apartment in Parham (Plantation) and send for a local man to take care of his wounds. Soon Oroonoko is able to eat and walk. Meetings are held to decide as to what should be the end of Oroonoko. It is decided that Oroonoko should be hanged but Mr. Trefry intervenes and drives the persecutors out. He says that nobody has any right to decide over the matters of slaves on his plantation. Eventually it is decided that the plantation shall admit only those who favour Oroonoko and sympathise with him.

After his wounds were completely healed, Oroonoko begs permission from Mr. Trefry to go for walk with Imoinda. Mr. Trefry thinks it would do Oroonoko some good after such an ordeal. Oroonoko advances with his pregnant wife towards the forest and after that 'long silent gazing' on her face, tells her his plan. With tears gushing from his eyes, he tells her that he must kill her first to save her from being a prey to the enraged multitude. Thereafter, he tells her, he plans to kill all his enemies and in the end, kill himself – better than destined to be entitled as slaves for generations unspecified. Imoinda, having understood him, pleads to be killed by her lord's hands to save her honour. Oroonoko embraces her with all the passion and she lays herself down on the ground while Oroonoko draws his knife and cuts her throat and severs it from her pregnant body. He then lays her corpse on a bed of leaves and flowers and covers her with more flowers leaving only her face exposed. But once he realises that he killed the angel of his heart, 'his grief swells up to rage' and he cries madly over Imoinda and several times tries to draw his knife over himself but retreats because his enemies deserve to be killed ruthlessly by his knife and especially now that that he has slaughtered the dearest gift that Nature gave him. Apparently, out of grief and despair, he is not able to leave her side and before he can guess the length of time, out of depression first and secondly out of his numb and feeble limbs due to lack of food and water, six days pass.

Conclusion – A Memorable Royal Traitor:

A team of forty men is sent towards the direction in which Oroonoko went and after covering some distance, they start following the stink of a dead human body thinking that Oroonoko must have met some accident and died. Soon they find him hiding behind a tree from where he tells them that he killed Imoinda and had resolved to kill them but now his feeble body is scarcely supporting his heart's deed. With this he kills an Englishman and in a suicidal attempt, he cuts a piece of flesh from his throat and rips his own belly but is overcome by Tuscan, now a slave-turned-English supporter, and others and is taken to Parham for the Whites cannot afford to let a Negro die dignified. They prefer to take the slaves alive even if they plan to kill them afterward; a question of their ego! Attended by a local doctor, his wounds are somewhat healed but the doctor assures that Oroonoko will not live long. The Deputy Governor perceiving it a golden opportunity to take his revenge from Oroonoko, takes Mr. Trefry to some

'pretended earnest business' up the river and leaves some murderers behind him to execute Oroonoko in the most brutal way, by tying him to the post and arranging a fire in which to hurl his chopped body pieces. When this done then to make Oroonoko's vain courage an example for other slaves and his white supporters, his quartered body is carried to be shown around in several chief plantations.

Aphra Behn also blames her own family who were present at the time of execution but none of them stirred to oppose or object at the murderers' behaviour. Through her pen she has spent a tough time relating the ordeals of a slave and has left her blood curdled reader to judge the fate of a 'royal slave' or a 'royal traitor'.

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