Literature, Christianity, and Empire

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Empires have existed in the world for most of recorded history. One nation rises and conquers its neighbors only to fall to another. Throughout this trend, literature has been written by people within and outside the dominant empire. Literature can either perpetuate empirical ideology or challenge it depending on whether the authors live within the episteme of the empire or in tension with it. Whichever their position, the authors’ written works reflect aspects of their worldview and culture even if they do not intend them to. The morals and critiques that they write to convey are therefore influenced by the context in which they live. Empires such as the British Empire of the seventeenth century sought to expand their borders and to accrue more land, but they share another goal with modern models of empires. Today’s empires are not so concerned with the addition of more land as they are with spreading their influence to other countries just as older models of empires did. Empires can be good in some respects, but they can become problematic when they use a religion like Christianity to justify their actions, making them nearly unimpeachable. Under such strong empirical orders the structures of society are strong enough to make all the citizens internalize them, making it difficult (if not impossible for some) to imagine alternative possibilities. In order to demonstrate the capabilities of literature with respects to empire, I intend to closely examine one piece of literature which embodies many of the overall themes.

The piece I have chosen to examine is a novella written in 1688 by Aphra Behn, an English woman who was struggling to earn a living by her pen in a time dominated by men. The novella is entitled Oroonoko and is a story written as an account of a true event that happened in the South American colony of Surinam, as witnessed by the authoress herself who serves as the narrator. The text was intended to be a critique of society and slavery, but was written from a position embedded in the context of the empire and thus perpetuates certain aspects of the society. The novella is written by a marginalized woman about a marginalized slave. Despite the similarities in their positions, there are several very important differences as well. As Kwok Pui-lan suggests in her book Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology, it is not enough to examine the text from a feminist or
postcolonial position alone, so I shall be combining these hermeneutical lenses in my argument about *Oroonoko* and its relevance for the readers of the original time as well as present readers in the United States. Beginning with the inner-most layer of the literature, I will examine the novella itself and the oppression imposed by the British Empire, followed by a move outward to discuss the context in which it was written and the faults of the nature of the empire there. I will argue that Christianity was used by the British Empire to legitimate acts and ideas it ought not to have supported and that the oppressed female author is able to still uphold Christianity while critiquing the empire’s use of it. Finally, I will discuss the effect of the novel on modern-day readers. The first section, in which I discuss the story, will necessarily be a more literary discussion, while the second two sections will draw support from the works of Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, Richard Horsley, Kelly Brown Douglas, and Kwok Pui-lan who discuss the faults and merits of empire by examining the role of Christianity and the United States in today’s world.

In order to examine the story in the light of empire, I will begin with the inner-most layer: the story itself. There are two forms of oppression in the British Empire which are addressed in *Oroonoko*: that of slaves, and that of females. *Oroonoko* is the story of the “Royal Slave” Oroonoko, a prince in his native country in Africa who is sold into slavery. He is friendly with a slave-trading captain who comes to his region often and even trades enemy prisoners as slaves to him. Oroonoko and the captain dine together on the ship when the captain betrays him and captures him and his men, immediately setting sail for Surinam in South America. Once he arrives, he is sold to Mr. Trefry, and is reunited with his lost love, Imoinda, who has also been made a slave. Oroonoko is of such impressive charm, deportment, intelligence, and appearance that he is greatly respected by the other slaves, Trefry, and the narrator. He is treated very well for a slave, being allowed to live with his wife (which he was not able to do in Africa due to politics and traditions), and not being required to work as much as the others. Despite his frustration at his enslavement, he has not yet learned the error of the ways of slavery and is willing to trade more slaves to Trefry in exchange for his own freedom.

Oroonoko is very much a prisoner of the European colonial system and he cannot convince his owner to release him, despite his attempts to strike bargains: “he was every Day treating with Trefry for his and [Imoinda’s] Liberty; and offer’d either Gold, or a vast quantity of Slaves...They fed him from Day to Day with Promises, and delay’d him, till the Lord Governor shou’d come; so that he began to suspect them of falsehood” (Behn 40-1). When there is no solution forthcoming,
Oroonoko decides to take action and leads the slaves in an escape to freedom. He gives an impressive speech to his fellow slaves in order to inspire them and convince them that there is something wrong with their situation. Like Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda claims in her book *Healing a Broken World*, the dominant ideology is morally disabling because its subjects cannot imagine an alternative; the slaves had accepted the hopelessness of their situation. Oroonoko desires that he and the slaves become a community which strives together for their freedom from the domination of the whites, thus instituting moral agency once again. Oroonoko instills the other slaves with a sense of independence and rebellion against the dominant whites who have created such an unsavory truth for them to suffer under:

> And why...my dear Friends and Fellow-sufferers, shou'd we be Slaves to an unknown People? Have they Vanquish'd us Nobly in Fight?...This wou'd not anger a Noble Heart, this wou'd not animate a Souldier's Soul; no, but we are Bought and Sold like Apes...shall we render Obedience to such a degenerate Race, who have no one Humane Vertue left, to distinguish 'em from the vilest Creatures? (Behn 52-3)

The British Empire requires slaves to maintain its prosperity in trade, and so it uses slavery to man the plantations. The Christian Europeans are the dominant group and they do all they can to make the slaves internalize the fact that they are subordinate and not fully human.

Within the British Empire, there are certain understandings of good and evil, morality and immorality, and superior and inferior. The white European Christians (in particular the British people in this case) view themselves as superior to all others because of their global prominence, and “once a group identifies itself as good and another group as bad, the ‘good’ group thinks it justifiable to place additional restrictions and controls on the ‘bad’ group. To restrain the bad group helps the forces of good win over the forces of evil” (Elizabeth Grosz qtd. in Hall 465). The text abounds with mentions of the “other” and “heathens” who are the blacks and the native Indians in Surinam. Oroonoko is praised because he is, in many ways, very European and can appeal to those whites who are trapped in the empirical ideology. He has been taught by a French philosopher, can speak English, French, and Spanish, and is European-looking except for his jet-black skin: “He was pretty tall, but of a Shape the most exact that can be fancy’d...His nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat” (Behn 13). As Behn describes Oroonoko, he is “not only a natural European and aristocrat, but a natural neoclassicist and royalist as well” (Brown 234). The British believed that white people were naturally more moral than the heathen blacks and they sought to spread their ways, believing...
that if it worked for them, it would work for everyone else as well. In his book *American Providence: A Nation with a Mission*, Stephen H. Webb establishes his opinion that America is a country chosen by God to bring about His Kingdom; in the meantime democracy, free trade, and capitalism should be spread to the world because they are systems that will work for the good of everyone (12). Behn’s hero’s possession of European qualities is either a flaw in her writing produced by her situation within the empire and the ideology, or it is a means of ensuring that her character appeals to her readers. Perhaps, if Behn (at least in part) invented Oroonoko from her imagination rather than recording a real person and events, she knew that her audience would be more likely to applaud a slave who is admirable by their European standards and thus might be more inclined to rethink the justice of the institution of slavery. Within an empire there is only one good way to be, and in this case the right way is to be white. This understanding of the binary in which whites are superior to blacks is what was held by the majority of the Europeans who would have read the book at the time of its publication.

Yet, in *Oroonoko*, Behn attempts to subvert this understanding by showing how corrupt the Europeans are in comparison to the shining examples of simplistic slaves and natives. Oroonoko makes two speeches arguing against the purity and virtue of the whites who claim to be followers of God, yet treat other people in such an abominable fashion. One of these speeches comes after his failed rebellion. Oroonoko rails against the whites who have put a stop to him, telling them that: “there was no Faith in the White Men, or the Gods they Ador’d; who instructed ‘em in Principles so false, that honest Men cou’d not live amongst ‘em; though no People profess’d so much, none perform’d so little” (Behn 56). Then he sarcastically adds that he is “asham’d of what he had done, in endeavoring to make those Free, who were by Nature Slaves, poor wretched Rogues, fit to be us’d as Christians Tools… and they wanted only but to be whipt into knowledge of the Christian Gods to be the vilest of all creeping things; to learn to Worship such Deities as had not Power to make ‘em Just, Brave, or Honest” (Behn 56). Thus Oroonoko and the author who records these words are expressing their distaste for the use of Christianity to legitimate the actions performed by the white men who have power in the story.

The native Indians also speak their opinions about the faults of the whites. The reader is first introduced to the natives when Behn praises them for their innocence and comparing them to the pre-fallen state of Adam and Eve, for there “is not to be seen an indecent Action, or Glance” and they seemed to be “an absolute Idea of the first state of Innocence, before Man knew how to sin” (Behn
9-10). The Indians see that the governor of Surinam is a hypocrite, asking, “What Name they had for a Man who promis’d a thing he did not do? The Governor told them, Such a man was a lyar, which was a word of infamy to a Gentleman. Then one of ‘em repyl’d, Governor, you are a Lyar, and guilty of that Infamy” (Behn 10). Along with the spread of their trade and religion, they are also teaching “Vice” and “Cunning,” which are unknown to the natives “but when taught by White Men” (Behn 10). Behn’s novella disapproves of the effects of the empire’s spreading influence because it corrupts the natural innocence of the people: “‘Tis [Nature] alone, if she were permitted, that better instructs the World than all the Inventions of Man: Religion wou’d here but destroy that Tranquility, they posses by Ignorance; and Laws wou’d here but teach ‘em how to know Offence, of which now they have no Notion” (10). The voiceless, oppressed people who are belittled by the plantation owners and political officials are portrayed in the novella as admirable, noble people.

The natives and the blacks are described in such admiring terms by Behn that it seems that she does not fall into the category of whites who believe that the black body is over-sexualized and evil as described by Kelly Brown Douglas in her book What’s Faith Got to Do With it? Yet Behn does express almost a wistful despair for the color of their skin which is the only thing that keeps them from being perfectly admirable, “for they have all that is called Beauty, except for the Colour” (Behn 9). Nor is this favorable presentation of blacks consistent with the typical Platonized Christianity described by Douglas, who claims that whites justified the efforts of missionaries who sought to tame the heathen others and teach them to value the soul over the body because they thought that blacks were too carnal. The mistrust of the body then legitimated lynching black bodies as a Christian act. Despite her distaste for black skin which is most likely a product of her cultural context, Behn is affirming the value of the black body and the black person while showing the flaws in the white people and their society. Her comments subvert the belief in the supremacy of the Christian faith, for the hero of the story, who is the most admirable person presented, is not Christian and despises the way in which the Christians behave.

In addition to addressing the oppression of the blacks, Oroonoko also includes a commentary on the oppression of women. Within the white society, the narrator, a woman, has very little power despite the fact that she has the appropriate skin color to benefit from the empire. The narrator is the highest ranking person in the area, being the daughter of the intended Lieutenant General of the colony (who died at sea before he could take his post), yet she has very little real power.
The men around her do what they please regarding Oroonoko and the slaves despite her protests. The Lieutenant Governor tricks Oroonoko into surrendering himself, whips him cruelly and then kills him in a gruesome fashion. The narrator is unable to stop this. She alternates between identifying with the slaves and with the Europeans, but in the end, she “separates herself from the Europeans responsible for Oroonoko’s downfall…If the reader wonders why someone of her high social position did nothing to protect Oroonoko from the vicious treatment he gets, the answer lies in her sex” (Spencer 217). Her femininity and oppression are useful in her role as the narrator because she floats between the dominant and the oppressed in the story. There are “similarities between the slave’s and the woman’s positions” which “allow her her sympathetic insight into the hero’s feelings at the same time as she creates a full sense of the difference of his race and culture…she can present a picture of both sides” (Spencer 218). The narrator is oppressed like Oroonoko, but still enjoys some of the privileges of the dominant group.

Behn uses her character of Oroonoko to accomplish things similar to what Richard A. Horsley claims Jesus did in his own culture in his book *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*. According to Horsley, Jesus was in tension with the Roman Empire and spoke against the temple which was the center of religion, the economy, and politics. In speaking against the temple, Jesus was challenging everything it stood for, and thus met the fate of an enemy of state: crucifixion. Horsley points out that the nature of the Roman Empire was to expand using military force because the military provides stability. The Romans sought to make everyone believe and think the same thing which was debilitating to the egalitarian community that the covenant promised (Horsley 14). The temple embodied the combination of the state, the economy, and the religion of which Jesus disapproved. In response to Jesus’ opposition, the Romans used terror to silence him and his thoughts—they executed him in a horrible fashion to warn others from attempting to change the system (Horsley 28).

The language used in Oroonoko’s execution scene evokes images of Jesus’ crucifixion. When Oroonoko is caught during his escape attempt, he welcomes death as a means by which to finally escape the episteme, rather than being frustrated at his inevitable demise. Likewise, Jesus does not act against his death, but instead he forgives his prosecutors and dies without complaint. He enters into death and defeats it through his resurrection three days later, thereby making it something that need not be feared and in doing so, strips the state of its most powerful weapon. In a similar fashion, Oroonoko does not try to fight against his death, but calmly accepts it, “and he replie[s], smiling, *A Blessing on thee*” (Behn
64). He asks for a pipe to smoke while they kill him, never making a sound as “they cut his Ears, and his Nose, and burn’d them; he still Smoak’d on, as if nothing had touch’d him; then they hack’d off one of his Arms, and still he bore up…but at the cutting off the other Arm, his Head sunk, and his Pipe drop’d; and he gave up the Ghost, without a Groan, or a Reproach” (Behn 64). Oroonoko reverses the roles of the blacks and whites in this scene; he acts like the stoic, refined white man as he smokes his pipe while a savage Englishman dismembers him in an approach that falls under the category of the behavior of heathens. By acting so nobly, Oroonoko, a slave, takes away the horrific meaning of death because he embraces it as the one way to gain his freedom. The episteme comes out of this situation in worse shape because it has lost its weapon and the recording of the event may lead to a resurrection-like event that will produce more rebellions amongst the slaves. Behn states that her purpose in writing the story is to ensure that the actions of so great a man will not go unknown, and perhaps there will be recognition of the errors of the ways of slavery and Orientalism (the differentiation between “us” and the unusual and oftentimes monstrous “other”) due to her writing. The royal slave succeeds in his endeavor to change the episteme through his martyr-like death in a way that he may not have been able to accomplish in life.

The social context in which the novella was written also plays a major part in determining what is being taught by the story. The book was written by a woman in the 17th century when women were not supposed to be supporting themselves financially, let alone writing. She was “determined to be accepted on equal terms with men,” however, and worked very hard to acquire a fair amount of fame and success as a poet, playwright, and novelist (Spencer 212). There is historical evidence that she did visit Surinam in her lifetime and many of the details included in her writing are more accurate than the standard reference material about South America to which most authors referred: “Behn does not seem to rely on any particular sources, and she includes practical information that does not seem readily available in Europe, but if she made no use of texts, she would have been very nearly alone” (Lipking xiv). She is praised by Virginia Woolf for opening the way to later women writers: “She made, by working very hard, enough to live on. The importance of that fact outweighs anything that she actually wrote...for here begins the freedom of the mind, or rather the possibility that in the course of time the mind will be free to write what it likes...it was she who earned [later women writers] the right to speak their mind” (qtd. in Oroonoko 197). She, as the narrator and author, made the story available to the public and inspired them to reconsider the situation of slavery. Yet the history she relates should be viewed with suspicion,
for “history, in a more current view, must be understood as an official narrative by privileged voices” (Lipking xi). Behn’s story “portrays other people who had their own histories, though forever distorted, written by the literate Europeans” (Lipking xii). The Europeans were the ones with the language and capabilities of spreading a story through print, and they were the dominant group, thus their perspective on things is what is recorded.

Behn’s novella undermines the assumption of white supremacy and the correct interpretation of Christianity by the Empire. Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer wrote in Saving Christianity from Empire that the people have no voice in the Empire, but Behn seeks to give voice to the voiceless slaves and women alike in a world dominated by men who view blacks as inferior: “I was my self an Eye-Witness to a great part, or what you will find here set down; and what I cou’d not be Witness of, I receiv’d from the Mouth of the chief Actor of this History, the Hero himself, who gave us the whole Transactions of his Youth” (Behn 8). The intentions of the British Empire and many other empires to spread their ideals become dangerous when attached to an idea of God: “[noble intentions and ideologies] are generally more dangerous when believed and internalized, and most dangerous when linked to God and a religious sense of mission” (Nelson-Pallmeyer 22). Thus Christianity should be removed from Empire and be allowed to stand in tension with it as Behn attempts to do by critiquing the white’s Christianity in Oroonoko but having her narrator retain her faith in God throughout the events. The narrator does not approve of the way the slave owners and the Lieutenant Governor use Christianity to legitimate their brutal murder of Oroonoko. The Empire distorts the understanding of human interrelations and causes people to act violently toward one another as Oroonoko did against his captors and as the whites did against Oroonoko for rebelling against them. Such violence is not in-keeping with Jesus’ methods and the teachings of the Bible according to Nelson-Pallmeyer.

The British Empire disabled moral agency in the citizens. Within the novella, the narrator and Oroonoko’s owner, Trefry, disagree with the treatment he is receiving, but they cannot imagine a solution to the problem because they are imbedded in the ideology of the empire. The British Empire is thus morally disabling as Cynthia Moe-Lobeda describes. Although Moe-Lobeda is discussing the United States as the empire in question in her book, Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God, the same principles apply to this situation of a woman writing in the British Empire of the seventeenth century. Globalization, she says, corrupts democracy which should ideally mean the people have power and a voice: “globalization corrodes the moral agency required to resist it and to move
toward more just and sustainable alternatives” (Moe-Lobeda 30). In the British Empire, the slaves and the women are silenced most often. The Empire perpetuates the demands of trade and the economy. Behn describes with surprising detail the commodities of Surinam that are desirable to fashionable Europeans (Behn 8-9). The episteme established by the Empire means that the people cannot think of any alternatives; their imaginations cannot conceive of a different and better way for society to function. When the people no longer have any say in the political structures, they no longer have moral agency which is defined as “the power to embody active love for creation including self, other, and other-than-human creation. Moral agency suggests the power to orient life around the long-term well-being of communities and the Earth, prioritizing the concerns of the most vulnerable” (Moe-Lobeda 38). Being political by nature, moral agency requires action on the part of the people, but empires like the Britain Behn lived and wrote in; prevented the people from acting (38). The empire in Oroonoko exploits human relationships, human-divine relationships, and the relationship with the environment since the colonies are using the natural resources of the land for the benefit of greedy Europeans who want the newest fashionable curiosity and the money with which to buy it. People have become commodities. Christians, Moe-Lobeda argues, should be striving to maintain proper relations between man, God, and nature, ensuring the well-being and community of all. Behn’s writing attempts to point out the flaws in the human cultural structures and inspire action just as Oroonoko’s speech in the text sought to rally the slaves to his pursuit of freedom.

The final step to be taken is to an entirely external view of the text. Modern day readers come to Oroonoko from a different cultural context, and yet can still learn a great deal from this piece of literature. We must take care, however, to separate the text from the context in our minds by keeping track of what is critiquing the social structures and what is included unconsciously as a result of the context it was written in. Kwok Pui-lan advocates the “collaborative effort of many scholars with expertise in the theological, cultural, social, and institutional dimensions of Christianity in different historical epochs” in order to better interpret the Bible and the historical events therein, and I believe that a work such as Oroonoko is also a good example of literature that has been influenced by readers in different periods (Kwok 7). She observes that the natives of the New World “symbolized alterity, the Other at the periphery of the ‘civilized’ European world” which I believe includes the natives featured in Behn’s novella as well as the African slaves (Kwok 14). In order to avoid perpetuating certain aspects of the text that are most simply the product of the context of the British Empire, we need to understand the historical context of the novella and the situation of the author.
Behn’s work flips the binary of good and evil that the Euro-centric Empire of the 17th century produced and shows how the blacks can be noble while the whites can be bad. The use of Christianity to authorize the acts of inhumanity in Oroonoko is much like the Roman use of religion to legitimate its structures and oppression of people (such as the Galileans). Jesus acted against those structures as Oroonoko and Behn are. The Empire drowns out the voices of the people, but Behn seeks to make them heard by using her modest fame to relate a story (which she claims to be true) to the larger population of England. Her imagination helps to bring moral agency back to the people, and that is what modern readers should take away from the text. The empire is not always right. Christianity should not be used to legitimate structures of politics and economy because it will become corrupt instead of critiquing the ideology. In the fashion of Kwok Pui-lan, readers from different backgrounds should be inspired to dialogue with each other as the white female narrator conversed with the royal black male slave who came from a completely different world. Only by combining multiple lenses of interpretation together can we bring to the surface aspects of society and religion that have been pushed to the background to make way for the favored points of the dominant group. If this dialoguing does not occur, then the consequence can often be that God is captured and used to legitimate improper actions. Kwok observes how President Bush’s administration has been “provoking unabashedly biblical images and Christian rhetoric to justify his global ‘war against terrorism’” which she claims to be a misuse of theology (Kwok 6-7). One group capturing God results in confusion of text and context and the justified abuse of people as Douglas discusses in her book. White Christians understood black bodies to be less human, and therefore were perfectly justified in abusing them horribly just as Oroonoko, Imoinda, and the other slaves are (Douglas 114). Instead, Christianity should remain outside of the imperial structures so that it can remain critical of them and ensure that the people have moral agency and a voice in politics. Christianity should ensure that there is an “ethic of relationality,” as Moe-Lobeda calls it, which looks out for the well-being of everyone.

In conclusion, literature can either be a tool of the empire, or it can be a hammer to knock the supports out from under it. Although Oroonoko was written in 1688 from the context of the British Empire, the situations it presents are parallel to those facing the world in the twenty-first century with the super-power empire, the United States. All empires seek to spread their influence, but we should be aware that what works for one group of people may not work for everyone, and the empire should not exploit people or silence them in order to keep peace. Christianity
comes under Aphra Behn’s scrutiny as portrayed by the slave ship captain and the Lieutenant Governor of Surinam who both claim to be Christian but do not live up to the standards of kindness, honesty, and love that even a pagan slave expects from a human being. The wonderful thing about literature is its ability to have multiple layers of meaning. The story itself can say one thing, while the context of the author and the publication adds other possibilities, and of course the present reader’s context influences the reading as well. Literature is rich with possibility and, in the case of Oroonoko, it can critique a society as large as the British Empire by simply telling the story of one man and his life. Surely such an admirable character as Oroonoko deserves the protection of upstanding British citizens rather than an untimely and brutal death. The lesson of Behn’s story is thus that empire should be watched closely lest it produce oppression and injustice.

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