



# Journal of Social and Political Sciences

**Gökçen, Seren Boz. (2021), *Oroonoko: Post-colonialism, Kant and Todorov*. In: *Journal of Social and Political Sciences*, Vol.4, No.4, 95-100.**

ISSN 2615-3718

DOI: 10.31014/aior.1991.04.04.321

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<https://www.asianinstituteofresearch.org/>

Published by:  
The Asian Institute of Research

The *Journal of Social and Political Sciences* is an Open Access publication. It may be read, copied, and distributed free of charge according to the conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license.

The Asian Institute of Research *Social and Political Sciences* is a peer-reviewed International Journal. The journal covers scholarly articles in the fields of Social and Political Sciences, which include, but are not limited to, Anthropology, Government Studies, Political Sciences, Sociology, International Relations, Public Administration, History, Philosophy, Arts, Education, Linguistics, and Cultural Studies. As the journal is Open Access, it ensures high visibility and the increase of citations for all research articles published. The *Journal of Social and Political Sciences* aims to facilitate scholarly work on recent theoretical and practical aspects of Social and Political Sciences.



ASIAN INSTITUTE OF RESEARCH  
Connecting Scholars Worldwide



# *Oroonoko*: Post-colonialism, Kant and Todorov

Seren Boz Gökçen<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Istanbul Aydın University, Istanbul, Turkey. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5485-6160/>  
E-mail: serengokcen@stu.aydin.edu.tr

## Abstract

Postcolonial theory looks at history, and it links to culture, sociology, psychology, and even politics and law. This study aims to analyze Aphra Behn *Oroonoko* with respect to post-colonialism, in particular, investigation of the extent colonialism, slavery, and being other. *Oroonoko* displays literary fiction and reality at the same time; thus, Immanuel Kant's concepts of the noumenal world and phenomenal world have significant meaning. It draws on these theories and worlds: while the phenomenal world is day-to-day life conditions, the noumenal world is impossible to experience. On the other hand, Tzvetan Todorov's perspectives on stories and novels are different, and he puts them in scales such as fantastic, uncanny and marvelous. For *Oroonoko*, readers can decide the scales only if they are willing to understand Todorov's aims. The aim of this study is to examine Kant's concepts of the noumenal world and the phenomenal world, and Todorov's scales, as well as colonialism, slavery and being other.

**Keywords:** Kant, The Noumenal World, The Phenomenal World, Todorov's Scales, *Oroonoko*, Aphra Behn, Colonialism, Slavery, Being Other

## 1. Introduction

Immanuel Kant's concepts of the "noumenal world" and "phenomenal world" are the symbols of two divided worlds. In *Oroonoko*, one of these world is displayed. "The concept of a noumenon, which, however, is not at all positive and does not signify a determinate cognition of any sort of thing, but rather only the thinking of something in general, in which I abstract from all form of sensible intuition" (Kant, 1998, pp. 348-349). It is understood that "noumenal world" is not certain, which means nobody has had an experience of it. "The pure understanding can think to the phaenomena" (Kant, 1998, p. 348). It means that "phenomenal world" can be experienced easily.

Tzvetan Todorov has his scales in literature such as fantastic, uncanny and marvelous for novels and stories. These are also expanded such as uncanny, fantastic-uncanny, fantastic-marvelous and marvelous. "The reader makes a decision even if the character does not; he opts for one solution or the other, and thereby emerges from the fantastic. If he decides that the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described, we say that the work belongs to another genre: the uncanny: If, on the contrary, he decides that new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena, we enter the genre of the marvelous" (Todorov, 1973, p. 41). It means that the readers hesitate while reading the novel. Once they finish reading, readers can decide on the scales. If the readers are not hesitating any longer, the fantastic

effect is over.

In the novel *Oroonoko*, Immanuel Kant's worlds, Todorov's scales and post colonialism were examined together. Colonialism has brought about many significant problems such as slavery and being other, which are linked to post colonialism. The lives in colonialism are real and being colonized has had an adverse effect on their lives. This study relates to previous post colonialism works, which focus on how hard it is to be a slave and how hard slaves struggle to cope with many obstacles. In the novel, Oroonoko and Imoinda have to overcome the obstacles to survive and be free. The problem is that their power turns to their weakness. Their lives are noumenal world and/or phenomenal world. From past to present, slavery has been a significant issue and it has further meaning with Kant's concepts. The study relates to previous studies since colonialism and slavery have always been substantial meanings in literature. Using historical backgrounds and referring to English and American colonizers in 17<sup>th</sup> century, Behn creates her novel coherently. This study aims to improve perspectives of post colonialism in the novel *Oroonoko* using Kant's noumenal and phenomenal world and the scales of Todorov. This article aims to explain Kant's noumenal world and the phenomenal world in Imoinda and Oroonoko's lives since the novel involves both Kant's noumenal world and phenomenal world. Also, Todorov's scale of fantastic is in *Oroonoko* since fantastic is based on readers responds.

## 2. Literature review

Kant underlines that the world is divided into the noumenal world and phenomenal world, which can be analyzed in any authors' stories and novels as the concepts of the noumenal world and phenomenal world can indicate to readers whether the lives can be experienced or not. The novel, *Oroonokoo* (1688) by Aphra Behn shows Kant's noumenal and phenomenal world. In accordance with Kant's concept of the noumenal world, there is no insight into the possibility for noumena, but Kant's concept of phenomenal world is certain concrete objects, (1998, pp. 350-360). It is understood that the noumenal world cannot be experienced whereas phenomenal world cannot. "Early readers' acceptance of *Oroonoko* as 'true history' is a testament to a quick, communicative style that looks very much like reportage, to their own avidity for remarkable stories, and to the wholly uncertain boundaries between fact and fiction in the late seventeenth century" (Hughes & Todd, 2004, p. 168). Former readers can think that *Oroonoko* is real, yet it can change during the centuries since the latter readers can have different perspectives, and they can interrogate the reality for these events. For this reason, it results in two different perspectives which can be clarified by Kant's concepts of the noumenal world and phenomenal world.

Todorov's fantastic, uncanny and marvelous scales make this novel more comprehensible, and all these scales differ from each other by line. While deciding the scale of the stories or novels is not as easy as it seems without Todorov's explanations and perspectives. Todorov gives a very distinctive definition based on readers' responses as well as culture since fantastic can be called uncanny or marvelous can be called uncanny which changes from culture to culture. "[The] marvelous corresponds to an unknown phenomenon, never seen as yet, still to come-hence to a future; in the uncanny, on the other hand, we prefer the inexplicable to known facts, to a previous experience and thereby to the past. As for the fantastic itself, the hesitation which characterizes it cannot be situated, by and large, except in the present" (Todorov, 1973, p. 45). Fantastic as a genre: It does not need any clarification, and readers think that plot and fiction are completely coherent. It points directly to the present. Uncanny is about supernatural elements; it turns upside down, and it points to the past. Marvelous corresponds to the future, and it is basic phenomenon, something new and probably supernatural. The fantastic emerges in *Oroonoko* in which plot and fiction are in harmony, and Behn supports her imagination with historical backgrounds.

The main characters Imoinda and Oroonoko indicate that being powerful could turn into a weakness. Imoinda and Oroonoko are the victims of colonialism and slavery since their lives are restricted by Oroonoko's grandfather who is the King of Coromantien. In comparison with Johnson, *Oroonoko* is a dramatic novel, and the plot in which Oroonoko is a black hero and the first drawn character in English fiction is developed by Behn (1925, p. 337). Oroonoko and Imoinda have crucial moments in their lives. For instance, Oroonoko and Imoinda are separated by the King since he desires Imoinda and take her from Oroonoko. She has to obey the king due to her fear of him; however, she dedicates herself to Oroonoko. He comes from royal lineage, and he is a Coromantien prince. "He

told Byam he had rather die than live upon the same earth with such dogs” (Behn, 1688, p. 64). It is understood that Oroonoko sees himself as a royal, and he prefers to die to living with such dogs, by which he means cruel colonizers.

Oroonoko secretly sleeps with Imoinda. When the king notices this, he punishes them, and he exiles Imoinda as a slave. Oroonoko thinks that she is dead. His life turns upside down. This love triangle makes his life much worse. He is kidnapped by an English slave trader, English Captain Driver, and taken to Surinam, South America, where there is a British slave colony. Ironically, not long ago, Oroonoko would sell slaves to him. The moment he is enslaved, his fate changes. He thinks that he has lost his lover; nevertheless, luckily they run into each other in Surinam. Both of them are slaves. “Oroonoko’s story, however, does not treat ordinary slave life. Instead it dramatizes what observers understood to be wrongs or special harshness’s, portrayed as they are suffered personally, always in an exacerbated form” (Hughes & Todd, 2004, p. 174). Oroonoko is not an ordinary slave; he comes from royal family which affects his life as a prince and even as a slave. He is described dramatically, and Behn sometimes exaggerates Oroonoko as if he is a hero.

Oroonoko and Imoinda are slaves, and the problem is that their names are changed by their new white King; Oroonoko is called Caesar, Imoinda is called Clemene. Changing the name is a simple way to assimilate and destroy identity. It brings about native alienation. According to Ferguson, Behn raises the issue of native alienation: Oroonoko and Imoinda are compulsorily renamed, and they are the victims (Ferguson, 1992, p. 352). Although Oroonoko becomes a royal slave, he is not forced to work hard, but he becomes other. When they run into each other coincidentally, their dreams come true. They get married and she gets pregnant. Oroonoko starts to demand their freedom. They begin to struggle to become free as Oroonoko wants to bring up his baby freely. Oroonoko leads a rebellion; he is a powerful man like a warrior, and he needs to be supported by other slaves to gain their own freedom. He cannot achieve any success as Byam blocks Oroonoko. He feels frustrated and betrayed. He has only one option which is to kill his lover in order to prevent rape; therefore, though unwillingly, desperately and furiously, he kills Imoinda. “For wives have a respect for their husbands equal to what any other People pay a deity; and when a man finds any occasion to quit his wife, if he love[s] her, she dies by his hand; if not, he sells her” (Behn, 1688, p.69). It is really hard to protect themselves from colonizers. In the end, Oroonoko and Imoinda die. When Oroonoko dies, his body is divided into pieces and sent to a different part of the colony. The King and the colonial authorities are responsible for their death. With regard to Ferguson, colonialist discourse about slavery has negative attitudes toward Africans (Ferguson, 1992, p. 341). Getting own colonies makes colonizers powerful; they can do everything to actualize their aims. In *Oroonoko*, English colonialism is obvious, and Behn creates this novel in two perspectives for colonialism: good and bad.

Several studies have indicated that colonialism and slavery constantly continue in Africa continent, and people, who live in African continent, are affected by colonizers. Socio-economic conditions, education levels, languages and religious beliefs reflect their lives conditions. They become estranged to their own culture due to psychological, economic and sociological aspects that reveal slavery regime, colonial order, the entangled people and changing language and religions; in the end, they become other. Oroonoko loses his name, his honor and power. Aphra Behn claims that she witnessed some of the events herself, and she learnt some parts from Oroonoko. One of the most significant issues is that Behn is of English origin, and she could have fought against or supported colonialism and/or slavery. Even though it seems that the events could be real, some parts do not seem real at all as they do not make any sense. However, Kant’s the noumenal world and phenomenal world make the events more meaningful.

### 3. Method

In order to understand post colonialism, it is important to note that colonialism, slavery and being other are linked each other, and each of them has substantial meanings. All these are means of explaining how cruel being a part of post colonialism is. Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* has been criticized by many criticizers on whether the events are real or unreal; therefore, Kant’s clarification about the noumenal world and phenomenal world display substantial meanings. Moreover, Todorov’s scale is the best explanation for whether these events are real or not.

The theory of post-colonialism states that culture, historical backgrounds and countries' geographical locations are significant. In *Oroonoko*, a post-colonial theory is significant in that their geographical locations classify people according to their race; also they feel other because of slavery, and they struggle for their independence. The main characters are Oroonoko and Imoinda who grow up in Coramentien, what is now Ghana, near to African West coast. Oroonoko incites slaves to rebel since he is a slave and he wants to be free. Imoinda's fate is shaped by two men. Firstly, the King, who is Oroonoko's grandfather, wants to have Imoinda. Secondly, Oroonoko protects Imoinda, he is the real lover of her. Imoinda and Oroonoko's relationship exemplifies colonialism, slavery and being other.

Colonialism plays a significant role in Europe and England. They get their power through colonizing. Imoinda becomes a slave on the grounds that she does not obey the King of Coramentien, and she betrays him with Oroonoko. Instead of killing her, the King exiles her as a slave to punish her. Oroonoko is deceived by English Captain and he becomes a slave, too. Slavery is a utilitarian trade for colonialism since they get power through this trade. "The discourse of post-Enlightenment English colonialism often speaks in a tongue that is forked, not false. If colonialism takes power in the name of history, it repeatedly exercises its authority through the figures of farce" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 85). It is understood that colonialism speaks in different tongues, and colonialism gains power through the name of history and authority. Colonizers get more and more power from their colonies.

Slavery is a fundamental issue in *Oroonoko*. When Imoinda and Oroonoko become slaves, how cruel colonizers behave to slaves is well-understood. Oroonoko's life is turned upside down by the King of Coramentien. When the English get a new slave, they change their names as it is difficult to pronounce the original ones. Oroonoko and Imoinda's names are changed to Caesar and Clemene. They start to lose their identities. "Come, my Fellow-Slaves, let us descend, and see if we can meet with more Honour and Honesty in the next World we shall touch upon" (Behn, 1688, p. 39). Honor and honest are hard to find whereas enslavement is everywhere.

Being other divides humans by their gender, class and race. Oroonoko and Imoinda feel themselves as being other in Surinam since they become slaves. Although they come from a royal family, they are enslaved and get weaker. Oroonoko sells people as a slave, and now he understands those people's feelings and sufferings. "External or internal, this division into same and other is less a site of contradiction and conflict than culture's founding possibility: like gender, class and race, its willing accomplices, culture's categories are never essentialist, even when they aspire to be so" (Young, 2005, p. 28). It seems that different cultures bring different possibilities; culturally, people are divided into groups according to genders and races. Although Oroonoko is a slave, everybody understands that he comes from a royal family. He sells people as slaves in his former position as a prince, and he comes across some of them in Surinam. Those people respect him. To live under someone else's rules means losing identity and Oroonoko loses his identity and eventually his mind.

#### 4. Results

Aphra Behn claimed that she witnessed some of the events and she learnt some events from Oroonoko and other characters. She insisted that events and characters are real. However, some critics claim that all these are unreal. Some of them also claim that some parts could be real like time and places. Oroonoko and Imoinda are characters that are hard to find in real life. Purity and virtue are also hard to find in real life; however, colonialism and slavery politics are real in England. Behn creates a new world in the novel though whether it is real or unreal is arguable. In this perspective, it can link to Kant's understanding of both the noumenal world and phenomenal world. According to Kant, it does not have insight into the possibility of noumena, and the outside of domain the sphere of appearances is not full (1998, p. 350). It is understood that the noumenal world is not possible, and it is not of any appearance. In this respect, *Oroonoko* is linked to the noumenal world. Behn just creates these events and characters in her imagination; nobody can be like Oroonoko and Imoinda, and it is hard to go through their lives. "The division of objects and phaenomena and noumena, and of the world into a world of sense and a world of understanding" (Kant, 1998, p. 362). The world is divided into two: phenomenal and noumenal world or sense and understanding. It is like Behn's novel discussion, real or unreal - sensible or understandable. It can be both phenomenal and noumenal; therefore, the readers can think of two divided worlds in *Oroonoko*. According to Johnson, these events and the characters are mainly allegorical and the setting is an imaginary country (1925, p.

334). It indicates that Aphra Behn creates the characters and events on historical background, but she exaggerates the main characters Oroonoko and Imoinda; thus, it can relate to Kant's concepts of the noumenal and phenomenal world. The fundamental scoops are colonialism, slavery and being other that are the results of post-colonialism in the novel. They are all sensible and understandable. According to Rogers, While trying vigorously to make her novel more believable, Behn chooses subjects in a logical way based on history. "Kant to describe the world of things in themselves as a complement making up with the world of phenomena what we may call the world of the intelligible existence" (Hicks, 1938, p. 38). As seen, phenomenal world is related to the world of the intelligible existence since it is a simple life experience. "The realm of the noumena that we cannot know" (Boyajian, 1944, p. 446). It is understood that nobody can experience the noumenal world.

Among Todorov's fantastic, uncanny and marvelous scales, fantastic outstands in *Oroonoko* since fantastic does not include any explanations; readers accept plot, and they do not need any clarification. What happens to Oroonoko and Imoinda is related to their fate. When Oroonoko kills Imoinda, every explanation is plausible. Although he kills her, he does love her deeply. If he does not kill her, someone can rape or kill her. While his body is being cut, although he can hardly breathe, he does not care, and he keeps smoking cigarettes until he dies. This part may be illogical, but readers do not try to find any logic. In this way, the novel includes fantastic scale.

From past and present, history has always been a means of rooting. According to Edward Said, everything about human history is rooted in the earth, and people have planned to have territories, and they are necessarily to do something (1994, p. 7). In other words, whoever is powerful gets the territories. According to Robert Young, post-colonial theory results in different experiences of cultural and national origins and the color of the skin, all of which affect anyone's life. As a result of post-colonial theory, people will be pleased or oppressed (1994, p. 7). In the novel, Oroonoko and Imoinda have pleasurable lives, but then his grandfather's revenge and temper separate them, and they have experience of a different culture and different nation origin. They have experience of becoming enslaved and being other. Imoinda cannot claim any rights for herself since she is a woman, and women feel more alienated than men. "If in, the context production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak, 2010, p. 330). Women as other cannot speak and they are shadows. In fact, Imoinda is constantly under a man's shadow. Behn emphasizes women issues in her novel. "Behn was seriously interested in the problem of what the 'value' of women was in her society and experiments with dividing and isolating elements of conventional female value. Behn's version of a maximally desirable woman simultaneously possesses beauty, the power to evoke desire in men, wealth, and wit" (Hughes & Todd, 2004, p. 23). Behn is keen on explaining the value of women, she creates Imoinda as a beautiful, clever and strong woman since she aims to prove women's value.

For Schueller, history has constantly been a contrast set of narratives with an endless entanglement of imperial and colonial experience, and native resistance (2004, p. 171). It is clarified that there is a conflict between imperialism and colonialism throughout history. Oroonoko demands his own and his wife's freedom, but this conflict does not allow them to be free. Bhabha states that the effect of mimicry is disturbing (1984, p. 126). Oroonoko and Imoinda do not mimic other slaves or whites; however, colonizers enforce them to mimic and they directly change their names, which makes them feel alienated. Behn's emphasis on colonialism in *Oroonoko* represents the 17<sup>th</sup> century English colonialism and it has shaped the modern world (Hughes & Todd, 2004, p. 151). Behn tries to define colonialism and slavery in *Oroonoko*

## 5. Discussion

The research shows that there are the noumenal world and phenomenal world in *Oroonoko* since some researchers and critics have discussed the novel's realities. In addition, some events are logical and they make this novel more real. To illustrate, location is real, and Behn travelled Surinam when she was a child. However, the characters Oroonoko and Imoinda cannot be real because of their honor and their behaviors as a hero and heroine. Their love can be real, their attitudes to each other can be real; also, the love triangle can be real, too. The love triangle brings in conflict between love and honor because of his grandfather.

On the other hand, Todorov's scale is significant for fiction. The scale of fantastic fits in *Oroonoko*. The novel does not need any explanations. Everything seems coherent and logical, yet all these things are based on readers' responses to decide on the fantastic scale. When readers stop hesitating, fantastic effect is over. In this perspective, *Oroonoko* includes fantastic scale as readers hesitate between events and main characters.

In this novel, it is possible to see the socio-economic and political features of the period. Behn describes the period of 17<sup>th</sup> century England and America, and she underlines colonialism: colonizer and colonized. Behn may support anti-slavery and anti-colonialism or she may advocate slavery and colonialism, which triggers many discussions. It is hard to respond to these arguments in that critics have two different scoops. The merely underlying thing is that Behn is willing to demonstrate her own imagination - half real, half unreal; thus, all these are related to Kant's concepts of the noumenal world and phenomenal world. In short, the noumenal and phenomenal world and fantastic scale are to be considered together in analyzing the novel.

## References

- Behn, A. (1688/2020). *Oroonoko or, the royal slave*. Global Grey.
- Bhabha, H. (1984). Of mimicry and man: the ambivalence of colonial discourse. *Discipleship: a Special Issue on Psychoanalysis*, 28. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/778467>
- Bhabha, H. (1994). *The location of culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Boyajian, A. (1944). A. A. Michelson visits Immanuel Kant. *The Scientific Monthly*, 59(6). 438-450. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/18651>
- Ferguson, M. (1992). Oroonoko birth of a paradigm. *New Literary History*, 23(2). 339-359. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/469240>
- Hicks, D. G. (1938). Great thinkers: (xii) Immanuel Kant. *Philosophy*, 13(49). 19-39. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3747022>
- Hughes, D., & Todd, J. (Eds.). (2004). *The Cambridge companion to Aphra Behn*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Johnson, D. E. (1925). Aphra Behn's Oroonoko. *The Journal of Negro History*, 10(3), 334-342. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2714121>
- Kant, Immanuel. (1998). *Critique of pure reason*. P. Guyer, & A. W. Wood (Eds. & Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Said, Edward. (1994). *Culture and imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Schueler, J. M. (2004). Postcolonial American studies. *American Literary History*, 16(1). 162-175. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3568015>
- Spivak, C. G. (2010). *Can the subaltern reflections on the history of an idea speak?*. R. C. Morris (Ed.). New York: Colombia University Press.
- Todorov, T. (1973). *The fantastic*. R. Howard (Trans.). London: Press of Case Western Reserve University.
- Young, R. (2004). *White mythologies*. New York: Routledge.