

Ignorance is Bliss: Aphra Behn's Paradise Lost Featuring Black Characters Falling from African Heaven

Nazan Yıldız

Abstract

This article reads Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave* (1688) as a rewriting of the paradise story of Adam and Eve largely identified with John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) by literary circles. Meeting the true colours of civilization via slavery, the paradisaical innocence of Oroonoko and Imoinda grows into a horrible experience that brings their downfall from African paradise, similar to Adam and Eve losing their innocence for the sake of knowledge. Drawing on the principles of primitivism, Behn emblematicizes a black Adam and Eve as representatives of mankind which subverts colonial and patriarchal discourses all in the same breath. In this respect, the article asseverates that *Oroonoko* serves as a microcosm of humanity at large which delineates the unremitting war between nature and civilization, and innocence and experience, as foregrounded in recent ecological studies, as well as men and women.

Keywords: Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko*, *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve, primitivism

Little Lamb, who make thee
Dost thou know who made thee,
Gave thee life, and bid thee feed

“The Lamb”, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, William Blake

APHRA BEHN: A WORDMONGER OF CONTROVERSY AND A FEMINIST ICON

Aphra Behn (1640–1689) was born into a society that was fraught with political strife and religious conflict as England was torn apart by the Civil War and the Stuart exile. Political and social unrest characterized the seventeenth century, which is remembered for the establishment of a republic, Charles I's death, years of war, horror, and carnage as well as the Crown's strict pressure over the state. Within this calamitous period, Behn enjoyed her greatest literary success during the Restoration (1660–1700). Perhaps as a result, the ideals of the monarchy and nobility are recurrently embraced in her oeuvre (Duffy 20). The Restoration Era, to which Behn belonged, was characterized by a resurgence of drama and literature produced roughly between 1660 and 1690, when, in contrast to earlier times, women like Aphra Behn were given a greater platform in the theatre. Plays and poetry by Aphra Behn that addressed gender and sexuality were allowed to be publicly issued. Like her male colleagues, Aphra Behn wrote openly and unprecedentedly about sex, while facing a lot of criticism. She was highly esteemed for her wit and talent, and in 1666, King Charles II hired her for secret duty in the Netherlands. She was unpaid and temporarily jailed for debt, so she started writing for money. Behn wrote verse tragicomedies in her early career. She wrote her first play, *The Forc'd Marriage*, in 1670. A year later, *The Amorous Prince* debuted. *Abdelazer*, her only tragedy, was performed in 1676. During the 1670s, she became more and more interested in farce and light comedy. Numerous ingenious and lively comedies, such as *The Rover* (which was staged in two parts in 1677 and 1681), were profitable ventures. The 1687 premiere of *The Emperor of the Moon* served as a model for the harlequinade, a type of comedic theatre that later gave rise to the English pantomime. Behn also adapted plays written by more established dramatists. She was Britain's most prolific playwright in the 1670s and 1680s, surpassed only by Poet Laureate John Dryden (Hutner 18). Behn was accepted as a member of the Earl of Rochester's circle and made acquaintances with many of the leading writers of the day, such as John Dryden, Elizabeth Barry, John Hoyle, Thomas Otway, and Edward Ravenscroft. The King usually attended the stagings of her plays. At the King's court, *The Rover* quickly gained popularity. It examined issues including gender roles, the distinction between desire and love,

and the use of deception as cover and had an extraordinary success. As theatre revenues dropped in the 1680s, Behn turned her attention from composing plays to novel writing, which soon turned into an increasingly lucrative endeavour. Behn composed poetry, too, the majority of which was included in *Poems upon Several Occasions*, encompassing *Lycidus; or, The Lover in Fashion* (1688) and *A Voyage to the Island of Love* (1684) (Hughes and Todd 1-10).

Even though Behn wrote a large number of plays, her fiction is more popular today. Among Behn's works of fiction were *The Fair Jilt* (1688) and the compound epistolary novel *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684-87). *Oroonoko; or, the Royal Slave* (1688), the most treated of Behn's novels, tells the story of a Coramantien-born African prince who is forced into slavery and later encounters the narrator in Surinam. *Oroonoko* is particularly noteworthy for exploring slavery, race, and gender, which were the central concerns of the time, as well as for succeeding Behn in an outstanding position for the growth of the English novel. Although Behn, above and beyond *Oroonoko*, is the writer of at least 14 pieces of prose fiction, 21 plays, and a sizable collection of verse, she still might be acknowledged as an underappreciated author along with receiving unfair criticism. As Gilbert and Gubar state in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, "like some real-life Duessa" Behn "was gradually but inexorably excluded (even exorcized) not only from the canon of serious literature but from the parlours and libraries of respectability" (63). Accordingly, there is a startling lack of agreement about the kind and scope of her accomplishments, most especially of *Oroonoko*. Robert Adams Day, to exemplify, calls *Oroonoko*'s narrative techniques "entirely original" and acclaims its "astonishing innovations" (373). Yet, an all-inclusive study of Behn's work by Frederick M. Link takes her fiction to be clichéd and comes to the conclusion that she "made no significant contribution to the development of the [novel] form" (151). Ian Watt, in *The Rise of the Novel*, in the same vein, ignores Behn's contribution to the novel genre and makes only two brief references to her (20, 36). Additionally, there is no consensus on the subject matter of *Oroonoko*. For instance, it has been criticized for displaying either a high royalist outlook or republican preconceptions.¹ Janet Todd encapsulates the disagreement about Behn as such: she "has a lethal combination of obscurity, secrecy, and staginess, which makes her an uneasy fit for any narrative, speculative or factual" (19). Despite the controversies over *Oroonoko*, Behn, beyond dispute, broke down boundaries and acted

1 About this argument, see, among others, W. J. Cameron, *New Light on Aphra Behn*. Auckland, 1961, 20; George Guffey, "Aphra Behn's Oroonoko: Occasion and Accomplishment," in *Two English Novelists: Aphra Behn and Anthony Trollope*. Ed. George Guffey and Andrew Wright. Los Angeles, 1975, esp. 16-17, and Laura Brown, "The Romance of Empire: Oroonoko and the Slave Trade," in *The New Eighteenth Century: Theory / Politics / English Literature*. Ed. Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown. New York, 1987. 41-61.

as a literary spirit for the succeeding posterity of women writers since she was one of the first English women to make a career via her writing. Playwrights like Delarivier Manley, Mary Pix, and Catherine Trotter addressed Behn as their most important forerunner and the one who first gave women authors a platform after her passing. Feminist critics and authors, Maureen Duffy, Angeline Goreau, Ruth Perry, Moira Ferguson, Jane Spencer, Elaine Hobby, and Janet Todd, among others, re-examined Behn's literary works, her writings were reprinted, and she was revived as a prominent female author. Behn's oeuvre presents one of the strongest literary rebuttals against the male-dominated eighteenth-century English literature circle. The legacy of Behn is echoed in Virginia Woolf's vocables in *A Room of One's Own* (1929):

All women together, ought to let flowers fall upon the grave of Aphra Behn [...] for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds [...] Behn proved that money could be made by writing at the sacrifice, perhaps, of certain agreeable qualities; and so by degrees writing became not merely a sign of folly and a distracted mind but was of practical importance. (113–114)

A playwright, poet, prose writer, and translator, Behn, as construed from Woolf's statements, gave women writers a chance to tell their own stories and recognition in the literary realm. Behn is, indisputably, served as the chief guiding spirit for past and present women writers, particularly for Jane Austen, George Eliot, and the Brontë Sisters, who tried to gain a place in the male-dominated literary world with the pseudonyms they had to take in order to publish their works during the Victorian era, the golden age of the novel, where Woolf was also endeavouring to exist both as a woman and a writer. In fact, Behn, who repeatedly expressed her concerns about being able to write the story of a noble hero in *Oroonoko* as a reminder of her drain similar to a Victorian woman writer, is the very predecessor of today's female poet laureates such as Carol Ann Duffy, Mona Van Duyn and Rita Dove.

OROONOKO, ITS CRITICAL RECEPTION, AND PRIMITIVENESS

One of the first English novels, Behn's *Oroonoko* was published in 1688 and is hailed as "the first humanitarian novel in English" (Cross 20). Although it combines the genres of mythology, reportage, travelogue, and memoir, -hybrid work-*Oroonoko* is categorized as a novel. Current criticism of Behn's *Oroonoko* has sought to address its politically and ideologically aware commitments; its genre,

its historical authenticity, its contribution to the emergence of the novel,² its justification of anti/feminism, its delineation of slavery, race, and the exotic Other alongside the English colonial ambition of the seventeenth-century, which in sundry ways helped to throw light on the contemporary world.³ Set in Coramantien on the African coast and in an English colony in Surinam, *Oroonoko* narrates the tale of a black African prince who is taken into slavery. Only one English work before *Oroonoko* featured a black hero, William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*, 1603. Behn's work, in contrast to *Othello*, works through primitivism, noteworthy to the purpose of the paper, too, with a positive lens on black people. Primitivism suggests that individuals in a primitive civilization have higher standards of morality and ethics than civilized people; hence, it is a nostalgic yearning for a bygone era of idealized living (Hirsch 485). Likewise, in many ways, Montaigne claims in *Of The Cannibals*, primitive people are superior to Europeans and despite their lack of social order, they are less cruel than Europeans (205). Montaigne's assertion comes into existence in Behn's words for the natives in *Oroonoko* as such:

[...] they knowing all the places where to seek the best food of the country and the means of getting it; and for very small and invaluable trifles, supply us with what it is impossible for us to get, for they do not only in the wood, and over the savannahs, in hunting, supply the parts of hounds by swiftly scouring through those almost impassable places, [...] in the water, one would think they were gods of the rivers, [...] And then for shooting, what they cannot take or reach with their hands, they do with arrows, and have so admirable an aim that they will split almost an hair. (15)

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- 2 Despite some counter-arguments, Behn's *Oroonoko* occupies a peerless seat in the development of the English novel. Romances were quite popular prior to *Oroonoko*'s debut. They typically included allegorical and type characters alongside fictitious settings of remote places and supernatural happenings. *Oroonoko*, yet, has local colour and touches of reality through its narrator's first-hand experience based on Behn's real stay in Surinam specifically by her accounts of tribal customs, justice, slave trading, clothing, and hunting as a reliable witness of a distant land. As Johnson puts it, in *Oroonoko*, "Behn did pioneer service, actually blazing the trail for the eighteenth-century realistic novelists, and the humanitarian writers that followed some years later. Here was a woman, who had the courage, at a time when the historical romances were enjoying a great vogue, to write a novel whose characters were real and whose setting was not in an imaginative country, but a real one" (335).
- 3 See among many others, Ernest Bernbaum, "Mrs. Behn's *Oroonoko*," in *Anniversary Papers by Colleagues and Pupils of George Lyman Kittredge*. Boston, 1913; Ruthe, T. Sheffey, "Some Evidence for A New Source of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," *Studies in Philology* 59 (1962): 53-57; Anita Pacheco, "Royalism and Honor in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 34. 3 (1994): 491-506; Susan Z. Andrade, "White Skin, Black Masks: Colonialism and the Sexual Politics of *Oroonoko*," *Cultural Critique* 27 (1994):189-214, and Laura J. Rosenthal, "*Oroonoko*: Reception, Ideology, and Narrative Strategy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aphra Behn*. Ed. Derek Hughes and Janet Todd. Glasgow, 2004, 151-165.

Pursuant to Henry David Thoreau's statement that humans should be a part of nature rather than a part of civilization ("Walking" /1851), to the narrator, Oroonoko and his people, who live in unity with nature, are more advanced than civilized Europeans. Thoreau's appreciation of nature introduces novel ideas that tackle the main ecological issues underscoring the clash between nature and civilisation as primitivism does. Although civilization is acknowledged as an advanced stage of human beings that have attained a high level of government, industry, science, and culture, nature is the world as it would be without humans and civilization. As ecological studies and ecocriticism document, numerous "civilised" human activities, such as pollution, deforestation, combustion of fossil fuels, and overpopulation, have a bearing on the physical environment. These kinds of changes have led to undrinkable water, low-quality air, erosion of soil, and global warming. That is how the discrepancy between nature and civilisation ties primitivism to ecological studies.⁴ The key period for the emergence of primitivism was the Age of Discovery (15th c.–17th c.) when European travellers came upon a different culture of the peoples of Asia and the Americas, Africa and Australasia, and the idea of colonialism that came with it. By contrasting urban European civilization with the uncivilized man living in accord with nature, as Diamond notes, philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment were prompted to query medieval conventions about the nature of man, society, and nature. They also questioned the class structure of civilized society and the intellectual and moral edifices of Christianity (159). Primitivism, additionally, stands completely against Eurocentrism and supposedly inferior East and superior West found its expression in the widely known dichotomy of *us* and *them*, or, as Edward Said suggests in *Orientalism* (1978), in the construction of Orient and Oriental discourse. Primitivism subverts the conviction that non-European peoples as the Other embodied the opposition of the European Self which has its roots in the Middle Ages, when Black and White in conjunction with Christians and Non-Christians were separated along the lines of race, religion, and culture. This

4 Apart from ecology, the concept of the Anthropocene is definitely at the centre of environmental debates. The antithesis of primitivism, the term Anthropocene (anthropo (human) cene (new, age)) was coined in 2000 by Nobel Prize-winning scientist Paul Crutzen to characterize the human-centred era. This geological period dates back to 1784 when the steam turbine was discovered. This is the time when it is acknowledged that humans altered the natural order of the planet and brought about unfavourable alterations to the climate and geology. In this era, humanity's impact on the environment and geology was mostly immeasurable, but it started to have a significant detrimental impact. Around this time, human activity extended so widely and became so powerful that it began to challenge the powers of nature. Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill, "The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?", *Ambio*, 38, 2007, 614. For more information on the Anthropocene see Bronislaw Szerszynski, "The End of the End of Nature: The Anthropocene and the Fate of the Human", *Oxford Literary Review*, 34/ 2, 2012, 165-84.

clash between colonialism and primitivism manifested itself in literature such as, among others, in the writings of Charles Dickens, Herman Melville, Joseph Conrad, Bartolomé de las Casas, Chinua Achebe, and R. K. Narayan.

Primitivism has taken its place in the accounts of explorers, too. According to Amerigo Vespucci's explanation, the Brazilian Indians were physically excellent and had a great deal of liberty (Franco 566). Christopher Columbus, likewise, believed that he had found the West Indies to be the long-lost Eden (Sanford 23). The narratives of the travels served as inspiration for works of literature such as Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly* (1509) and Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1526). Primitivism goes hand in hand with the concept of the Noble Savage which came into sight in the explorations of the eighteenth century. The idea of the Noble Savage dates back to ancient Greece when Homer, Pliny, and Xenophon romanticized the Arcadians and other primal peoples. Later, Roman authors like Horace, Virgil, and Ovid treated the Scythians similarly. The Noble Savage refers to a type of character who is uncontaminated by civilization. It, then, signifies the innate goodness and moral superiority of primitive people (Cudon 560-561) including the populaces of Africa and the Americas that had not been Christianised and interacted with Western civilization. Thereafter, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, most frequently credited with shaping the modern notion of the Noble Savage, expanded on the ideas of the term to idealise the primordial man as the supreme person whose behaviour should serve as an example for modern people and nations. To Rousseau, human beings are innately tranquil, and serenity and equality are embodied by people living in nature who are also socially egalitarian. As Rousseau specifies: "Men in a state of nature do not know good and evil, but their independence, along with the peacefulness of their passions, and their ignorance of vice keep them from doing ill" (71). In English literature, the term Noble Savage first came into view in John Dryden's *The Conquest of Granada* (1672), and it was afterward used in Behn's novel *Oroonoko* (1688). In *Atala* (1801), *René* (1802), and *Les Natchez* (1826), François-René de Chateaubriand glamorized the North American Indian, as in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Leatherstocking Tales* (1823-41), which includes the noble chief Chingachgook and his son Uncas. Other illustrations, among others, contain the three harpooners of the ship Pequod in Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), Queequeg, Daggoo, and Tashtego.

ADAMIC PRIMITIVENESS AND BEHN'S LOST AFRICAN PARADISE

In the eighteenth century, Western artists and scholars entered into “the conscious search in history for a more deeply expressive, permanent human nature and cultural structure in contrast to the nascent modern realities” by probing the values of the primal people (Diamond 215). The purported hallmarks of primitiveness are listed as follows: (1) liberty and absence of social grouping; (2) lack of private goods and money; (3) nakedness and carnal leniency; (4) lack of conformism; and (5) social equality (Franco 565–66). To the early Christians, the Adamic period encompassing the listed traits above was the golden age of primitivism. This period referred to Adam before the fall, who was viewed as an emblem of human perfection (Boas 3). For Christians, the first few chapters of Genesis paint a picture of a marvellously good creation in which people co-existed peacefully and in harmony with God and one another. Christians have maintained that the first human couple’s consumption of the forbidden fruit caused sin and conflict in humanity. Christian theology has relied heavily on this story of a good beginning, a terrible Fall, and a resolution of cosmic reunion in Christ (Kvam 4).

To give details, Adam and Eve were living in a state of innocence before they ate the forbidden fruit and fell from grace. In Augustine’s account, the wrongdoing of Adam and Eve, our proto-parents, whose tragic act of eating from the tree of good and evil resulted in their everlasting banishment from Eden, caused mankind to be deprived of paradisiacal happiness. For Augustine, due to the original sin, ever since Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which he had commanded them to avoid, they and their descendants have been fated to live a life of wretchedness and agony in the world. To Augustine, in addition to eradicating all kinds of human purity via their tragic fall, Adam and Eve also acquired the genes for human wickedness, which have since been passed down through the ages (Otten 47–48). In the early twentieth century, in contrast to Augustine, Biblical scholars like Hermann Gunkel and S.R. Driver proposed that the story of Paradise (Genesis 2–3) was, in fact, a myth that represented a crucial stage in human history, that is, the loss of childhood, inexperience, and innocence (11; 96). In like manner, to Mary Daly, the main message of the story of Paradise is the necessity to wake from the state of innocence and ignorance (67). In this perspective, as Korte suggests, the story depicts the change from a less developed and dependent state to an essential phase of adult life. The experience of Eve and Adam—yearning for the banned, making autonomous decisions, and blushing with shame—is construed by the growth model as a sign of personal and social growth that elevates and distinguishes the

relationship between people and God, not as a sign of “sin” or “apostasy”. This makes disobeying God’s laws an essential step for spiritual development, peaceful coexistence with others, and a cultivated connection with God (150). However, this divergence from God and innocence to a more progressive level, so to speak, closer to knowledge and civilization, results in disaster and expulsion from paradise for Adam and Eve, as it is for Oroonoko and Imoinda from African paradise in *Oroonoko*.

Oroonoko, based on Behn’s memories of Surinam, tells the story of an African prince. Right at the beginning of the novel, following primitivism, natives are portrayed by the narrator as friends to English: “for those we live with in perfect amity, without daring to command them, but on the contrary caress them with all the brotherly and friendly affection in the world” (12). Describing the clothing of natives, the narrator draws direct parallelism between them and Adam and Eve: “The beads they weave into aprons about a quarter of an ell long, and of the same breadth, working them very prettily in flowers of several colours of beads; which apron they wear just before them, as Adam and Eve did the fig-leaves, the men wearing a long strip of linen, which they deal with us for” (13). This nakedness is an emblem of innocence away from sin as in the case of Adam and Eve in the stage of innocence. As documented in Genesis, before the fall, Adam and Eve were created “naked” (Genesis 2:25, NIV) and they “felt no shame” (verse 25, NIV). The Creator had put a garment of light around Adam and Eve, a robe symbolic of His own character, which was perfectly reflected in them, so they didn’t need to wear material clothes. Simply put, they had no reason to be ashamed. They did not know what shame was because they had no sin in their ethics. After the Fall, when Adam and Eve ate the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, “the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked” (Genesis 3:7, NIV). As soon as they came to know sin, their intellectual eyes were unlocked and they saw that they were no longer innocent. Their innocence was tarnished by shame and remorse and they fell from paradise. As another example, the narrator, after extolling their physical features, gives the characteristics of natives by accentuating their innocence analogous to Adam and Eve:

They are extreme modest and bashful, very shy and nice of being touched. And though they are all thus naked, if one lives forever among them, there is not to be seen an indecent action or glance; and being continually used to see one another so unadorned, so like our first parents before the Fall, it seems as if they had no wishes. (13-14)

Apart from the innocence of the natives, Behn's delineation of Africa is similar to the description of heaven parallel to Genesis, also depicted by John Milton in *Paradise Lost*.⁵ The narrator of *Oroonoko* designates and exalts African heaven as such:

It is a continent whose vast extent was never yet known, and may contain more noble earth than all the universe besides [...] It affords all things both for beauty and use; it is there eternal Spring, always the very months of April, May and June. The shades are perpetual, the trees, bearing at once all degrees of leaves and fruit, from blooming buds to ripe Autumn, groves of oranges, lemons, citrons, figs, nutmegs and noble aromatics, continually bearing their fragrances. (52-53)

In a similar vein, the narrator alludes to a paradise garden when describing a grove beside a river. Even in the hottest part of summer, people can find calm and tranquillity in this grove, which is home to a variety of rare fruits and flowers:

[...] towards the river, was a walk or grove of orange and lemon trees, [...] whose flowery and fruity branches meet at the top and hindered the sun, [...] and the cool air that came from the river made it not only fit to entertain people in, at all the hottest hours of the day, but refreshed the sweet blossoms, and made it always sweet and charming, and sure the whole globe of the world cannot show so delightful a place as this grove was. (54)

As another example, the narrator, after extolling their physical features, gives the characteristics of natives by accentuating their innocence analogous to Adam and Eve: “[...] though they are all thus naked, if one lives forever among them, there is not to be seen an indecent action or glance; [...] like our first parents before the Fall [...] these people represented to me an absolute idea of the first state of innocence, before man knew how to sin” (13-14). In their justice system, there is no “fraud”, “vice or cunning” yet they were “taught by the white men” (14), that is by civilization. These features are used throughout the text to verify the superiority

5 In *Paradise Lost*, Milton describes heaven full of life for humans, animals and plants: “Now Morn her rosy steps in th’ eastern clime/Advancing, sowed the earth with orient pearl,/When Adam waked, so customed, for his sleep/Was airy light, from pure digestion bred,/And temperate vapors bland, which th’ only sound/Of leaves and fuming rills, Aurora’s fan,/ Lightly dispersed, and the shrill matin song/Of birds on every bough; so much the more” (V. 94-101). Moreover, unlike Joseph Conrad’s Africa, in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), repetitively compared to hell that God deserts, and where no civilization is traced, in Behn’s text, the pure nature of Africa equals paradise as in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s account of the garden of Aziz in *Paradise* (1994), enthused by different gardens in heaven mentioned in the Qur’an: “The quadrants were planted with trees and bushes, some of them in flower: lavender, henna, rosemary and aloe. In the open ground between the bushes were clovers and grasses, and scattered clumps of lilies and irises. [...] the ground rose into a terrace planted with poppies, yellow roses and jasmine” (42-43).

of the natives over the English as in the case between the natives and the British governor. When the British governor did not keep his promise to the natives, they thought he was dead and mourned because there was no such thing as breaking a commitment in their society. They asked the governor what to term a man who broke his word when they found out that he was still alive. The governor calls that person a “liar” “which was a word of infamy to a gentleman”; then one of the natives responded: “Governor, you are a liar, and guilty of that infamy” (14).

What is more, the prince of these noble natives, Oroonoko, like Adam, possesses the beauties of all humanity. First of all, similar to Adam’s depiction in the image of God in literary works (Boas 3), Oroonoko is likened to a “deity” (38, 73) in Behn’s text. He is “pretty tall, but of a shape the most exact that can be fancied; [...] “from head to foot” (18). Despite spending most of his short life in wars, this brave native’s knowledge of “humanity”, “greatness of soul”, “notions of true honour”, and absolute generosity” (17) fascinate the narrator. Furthermore, similar to Gabriel teaching Adam, Oroonoko is taught by a French tutor in “morals, language and science” (17). Oroonoko knows English, French, and Spanish. His education is no different from those in Europe by “the most refined schools of humanity and learning” (18). Her partner, Imoinda, as Eve was to Adam, is fully equal to Oroonoko by both her physical and character beauty: [S]he [is] female to the noble male, the beautiful black Venus to our young Mars, as charming in her person as he, and of delicate virtues (18). Holmesland describes their love as “heavenly” since they are “the counterparts of the Prince and Lady Happy as Neptune and a sea goddess” (227). Imoinda is the ideal woman, as Ferguson notes, in whom “physical beauty and moral purity merge in a well-nigh perfect combination” (349). She is so gorgeous that, analogous to Eve whose beauty makes the serpent-dressed devil forget his evil purpose in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*,⁶ even white men are after her. More’s a pity, that when this seamless couple is about to unite, their paths diverge bitterly because of the covetous aging king’s plan, who sets his eye on Imoinda.

A tougher test awaits Oroonoko, who is in so much pain after the fake demise of his Imoinda. Radically tearing down the traditional account of the paradise story documented in the Bible and Milton’s text,⁷ in Behn’s paradise, it is not Imoinda (Eve), but Oroonoko (Adam), who is deceived by the promise of wisdom. Similar to the devil veiled as a serpent, who deceives Eve that God wants to keep

6 Eve’s beauty is defined as “more delicious than those Gardens feign’d /Or of reviv’d Adonis, or renown’d Alcinous” (IX.240-41).

7 These are the words of the devil to Eve to deceive her to eat from the fruit: “O Sacred, Wise, and Wisdom-giving Plant,/ Mother of Science, Now I feel thy Power/ Within me cleere, not onely to discern/ Things in thir Causes, but to trace the ways/Of highest Agents, deemd however wise” (IX. 374-78).

her ignorant but he proposes her wisdom, the European captain, disguised in civilization, cheats Oroonoko with his knowledge and education, and promises him wisdom. Analogous to the devil's several attempts to deceive Eve, the slave-trading captain, "a man of a finer sort of address and conversation" (38) repeatedly invites Oroonoko to his ship. Enthralled by his education, knowledge, and intellectual speeches, Oroonoko finally accepts the invitation, gets on the ship, and is bewitched by "richly adorned with carpets and velvet cushions, [...] music and trumpets, [...] [and] all sorts of fine wines" (38). The captain, yet, deceives him, takes him prisoner, and sells him as a slave. Oroonoko, who is deceived under the pretext of civilization, realizes the real face of the white man and civilization, but it is too late. Even though this deception brings him back to his Imoinda who is alive but sold as a slave, it turns into a catastrophe for the couple bringing their end. Oroonoko and his wife Imoinda are promised independence by the white man, but they never deliver on it. Due to his royal status, Oroonoko is exempt from the typical hardships of slavery, but he still yearns to be freed. A problem over the future of their child is introduced by Imoinda's pregnancy. Oroonoko launches a revolt to obtain their freedom, but it is put down. He is tortured by the English despite their pledge of mercy. In a fit of rage and desperation, Oroonoko kills Imoinda to keep her from being raped and, presumably, from giving birth to other slaves. However, because of his grief at Imoinda's passing, he is unable to exact revenge.

The colonial rulers horribly dismember Oroonoko till he dies; his adversaries split apart his body. That is how Oroonoko and Imoinda fall from African heaven that is embodied in nature which is, in Behn's terms, "the most harmless, inoffensive and virtuous mistress" and a better instructor "than all the inventions of Man" which terminate the "tranquillity they[natives] possess by ignorance" (14). Behn's words, her preference for nature to civilization for humanity's own good, is resounded in Adam's words to Eve after the fall in Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "since our Eyes/Op'nd we find indeed, and find we know/Both Good and Evil, Good lost, and Evil got, /Bad Fruit of Knowledge, if this be to know,/Which leaves us naked thus, of Honour void,/Of Innocence, of Faith, of Puritie,/Our wonted Ornaments now soild and staind," (IX. 599-605). As Adam states, eating the fruit of knowledge opens their eyes, but they lose their honour and innocence. All in all, yearning for wisdom and knowledge deprives Adam and Eve, and Oroonoko and Imoinda of innocence and paradise. Counter to the traditional story, in Behn's story, Imoinda is completely innocent and becomes the victim of men, including Oroonoko. Thus, Behn upends both the oldest myth of humanity and its most noted scapegoat. Undoubtedly, this fits well with Behn's position as a female writer and the legacy she left to women.

CONCLUSION

Primitive people, by the colonial and Eurocentric discourse, have been largely observed as pure savages who would become humans by means of white man's civilisation. In recent years, yet, people have seemed to be overcome by civilization and its repercussions as manifested mainly in ecological studies in copious fields. With the dread of the future, human beings, day by day, realise how they give up all for progress and long for the past. Due to men's deeds for the sake of development, the heavenly world has turned into a dystopia in the twenty-first century abounding with the revulsions of tyranny and war alongside earthquakes, floods, and epidemics. The examination of the current plight of human beings requires a closer look at the past, even at the oldest story of our ancestors, Adam and Eve, and their allegorical roles as a light for humankind. My reading of Behn's *Oroonoko* as a rewriting of paradise story reveals how we, running after civilization, make our end by our own deeds, as if it is the meaning of being Adam and Eve. More radically, in opposition to colonial and patriarchal treatises, in Behn's story of paradise, the exotic Other turns into a black Adam and Eve as the representatives of humanity, and by making Oroonoko (Adam), instead of Imoinda (Eve), the one deceived in the name of accessing knowledge, Behn almost saves women from a lifetime stain. As the last word, Behn's paradise story in *Oroonoko* is a humanist pronouncement against colonial and racial convictions, a matriarchal declaration that turns upside down the traditional apple story and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, considered a patriarchal manifesto, and finally an ecological assertion upholding the superiority of nature over civilization, rendering Behn a writer who deserves a second and through look.

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Nazan Yıldız
 Karadeniz Technical University
 nazanyildiz1@hotmail.com



Nevednost je blaženost: izgubljeni raj Aphre Behn s črnskimi liki, ki padajo iz afriških nebes

Članek obravnava delo Aphre Behn *Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave* (1688) kot predelavo rajске zgodbe o Adamu in Evi, ki jo literarni krogi večinoma enačijo z *Izgubljenim rajem* Johna Milтона (1667). Rajska nedolžnost Oroonoka in Imoinde, ki se v suženjstvu sreča s pravimi barvami civilizacije, preraste v grozljivo izkušnjo, ki jima prinese padec iz afriškega raja, podobno kot sta Adam in Eva izgubila nedolžnost. Na podlagi načel primitivizma Behn simbolizira črnka Adama in Evo kot predstavnika človeštva, ki v isti sapi spodkopavata kolonialni in patriarhalni diskurz. V tem pogledu članek potrjuje, da Oroonoko služi kot mikrokozmos človeštva nasploh, ki razmejuje nenehno vojno med naravo in civilizacijo ter nedolžnostjo in izkušnjo, kot je v ospredju nedavnih ekoloških studij in tudi med moškimi in ženskami.

Ključne besede: Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko*, *Izgubljeni raj*, Adam in Eva, primitivizem