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Writing dignity under empire: Imoinda in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*

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Abstract

This article examines the figure of Imoinda in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* by situating her portrayal within the historical moment in which Behn was writing, a period marked by early colonial expansion and the marginal position of women writers within English literary culture. Rather than approaching Imoinda solely as a tragic romantic figure, the article reads her as a carefully imagined representation of female dignity, courage, and moral strength within systems structured by both patriarchy and empire. Behn's depiction of an enslaved Black woman who retains composure, loyalty, and ethical resolve was an unusual narrative choice in the seventeenth century, when colonial texts often reduced such figures to spectacle or silence. At the same time, the novel does not fully escape the ideological limits of its moment, and Imoinda's fate remains shaped by male authority and colonial violence. By attending to this tension, the article argues that Behn's portrayal reflects a moral unease with domination rather than a fully articulated political resistance. Imoinda's suffering and eventual death function not as romantic idealization but as a tragic exposure of the human cost of empire and gendered control. Through this reading, the paper suggests that *Oroonoko* gestures toward an early feminist ethical imagination, one that acknowledges female bravery and dignity even as it reveals the severe constraints placed upon women within early colonial narratives.

Keywords: Imoinda; *Oroonoko*; Aphra Behn; Feminist Literary Criticism; Female Agency; Colonial Patriarchy; Representation of Women; Restoration Literature.

Introduction

Aphra Behn was writing at a moment when both women's authorship and colonial expansion occupied uneasy positions within English cultural life. The late seventeenth century witnessed the consolidation of imperial trade networks and the normalization of slavery; even the literary authority remained overwhelmingly male. For a woman to write at all was already an act of negotiation with social suspicion, and for a woman to write about empire, race, and enslavement was to enter a discourse

shaped by power structures that left little room for dissent. *Oroonoko*, often read as an early anti-slavery narrative or a romance of heroic suffering, emerges from this complex historical context. Within it, Behn attempts something striking: she imagines not only a noble enslaved man but also a Black woman whose dignity and moral strength resist easy reduction. Critics such as Janet Todd have noted the tensions in Behn's representation of gender and authority in *Oroonoko*.

Imoinda's presence in the text is limited in terms of narrative space, yet it is far from incidental. At a time when enslaved women were frequently erased or rendered as nameless bodies within colonial writing, Behn grants Imoinda beauty, loyalty, courage, and emotional depth. This portrayal is unusual not because it overturns colonial ideology, but because it unsettles the expectations of how enslaved women were typically represented. Imoinda is not merely a romantic attachment to Oroonoko, nor is she depicted as a passive victim without interiority. Instead, she is repeatedly framed as ethically grounded and emotionally resilient, qualities that the narrative appears to admire even though it ultimately confines her fate within patriarchal and colonial limits.

It would be misleading, however, to read Behn's representation as a fully developed feminist or anti-colonial statement. The novel remains deeply entangled in the ideological structures of its time. Authority is male, agency is unevenly distributed, and Imoinda's life and death are shaped by decisions made by men within systems she cannot escape. Yet it is precisely within these constraints that Behn's moral imagination becomes visible. The tension between admiration and limitation, between sympathy and narrative control, reveals an author negotiating the ethical implications of empire without possessing the conceptual language to openly challenge it. This article approaches Imoinda as a figure through whom Behn explores questions of dignity, suffering, and moral worth under conditions of domination. Rather than treating Imoinda as a symbol of resistance or a silenced subject, the discussion focuses on how her portrayal exposes the human cost of colonial power while remaining shaped by the narrative conventions of the seventeenth century. Behn's decision to render Imoinda as courageous and ethically steadfast does not dismantle the structures that oppress her, but it does invite readers to confront the violence of those structures more directly.

By situating Imoinda within the historical realities of women's authorship and early imperial expansion, this paper argues that *Oroonoko* reflects an emerging ethical discomfort with domination, particularly as it intersects with gender. Imoinda's story does not offer liberation, but it does gesture toward a recognition of female dignity that exceeds the ideological comfort of its moment. In reading her this way, this article seeks to understand not only what Behn could imagine but also where her imagination was forced to stop.

Imoinda as a Figure of Dignity and Moral Strength: Imoinda enters the novel already marked for admiration, yet what sustains her presence in the narrative is not merely her beauty or her association with Oroonoko, but the steadiness with which she carries herself amid drastically changing circumstances. From the outset, Behn frames her as emotionally intelligent and ethically grounded, qualities that continue to define her even as her social position collapses from royal consort to enslaved woman. In a narrative world shaped by conquest, displacement, and possession, Imoinda's strength is not theatrical or defiant, but quiet and deliberate.

"She was as sensible of power as she was of the loss of liberty."

Her loyalty, often read as a conventional feminine virtue, takes on a different weight when considered in context. It is not blind submission, nor is it simply an extension of romantic devotion. Rather, it appears as a chosen ethical stance in a world where choice is increasingly denied to her. Even under enslavement, Imoinda's commitment to Oroonoko is framed as conscious and reflective rather than coerced. She understands the brutality of their condition, yet she refuses to abandon her sense of self or moral clarity. In this sense, loyalty becomes less a marker of passivity and more a form of endurance.

What is striking is how Behn repeatedly emphasizes Imoinda's composure in moments designed to strip her of dignity. She suffers displacement, loss of status, and physical confinement, yet the narrative consistently resists portraying her as hysterical, broken, or morally diminished. Instead, her emotional responses are measured, grounded, and intelligible. This restraint does not signal emotional emptiness; rather, it suggests a strength that operates inwardly, a refusal to let violence fully define her interior life. Behn seems invested in preserving Imoinda's humanity even as the plot steadily removes her freedom. At the same time, Imoinda's moral strength is inseparable from vulnerability. The text does not romanticize her suffering, nor does it grant her immunity from fear or pain. She feels loss deeply, and her awareness of the precariousness of her condition sharpens rather than weakens her resolve. This balance between vulnerability and resilience complicates any reading of her as a purely idealized figure. Instead, she appears as a woman navigating circumstances that overwhelm her power, yet refusing to relinquish her ethical selfhood.

Seen this way, Imoinda's agency does not lie in overt resistance or political action, categories that the narrative is structurally unable to sustain. It lies instead in her capacity to maintain dignity under extreme constraint. Behn's portrayal suggests that moral strength, particularly for women in colonial and patriarchal contexts, often takes forms that are quiet, inward, and easily overlooked. Imoinda does not overturn the system that confines her, but her presence exposes its violence by contrast. Her dignity makes domination visible.

"She made no complaints, but bore all with a constancy that deserved a better fate."

This representation does not free Imoinda from narrative control, but it does complicate the terms on which she is read. She is neither a passive victim nor a romantic abstraction. Rather, she emerges as a figure whose ethical coherence persists even as the world around her collapses, offering a subtle but powerful challenge to the assumptions that govern women's representation in early colonial literature.

Colonial Power and the Ethics of Representation: While Imoinda is consistently portrayed with dignity and moral strength, her fate is ultimately shaped by forces beyond her control, forces rooted in both colonial power and patriarchal authority. *Oroonoko* unfolds within a narrative structure that privileges male action and imperial movement, and Imoinda's life remains entangled in systems that deny her autonomy even as they acknowledge her worth. This tension lies at the heart of Behn's representation. *Colonial power in Oroonoko operates not only through physical domination but also through narrative control.* Enslavement strips Imoinda of social status and geographical belonging, relocating her into a space where her body becomes subject to ownership and surveillance. Behn does not disguise the violence of this system, but neither does she dismantle it. Instead, she frames Imoinda's suffering as tragic and unavoidable, a move that reflects the ideological limits of early colonial storytelling. Sympathy is permitted, but structural challenge remains largely out of reach.

At the same time, Behn's attention to Imoinda's interiority complicates the colonial logic that seeks to reduce enslaved women to silence or spectacle. Imoinda is not rendered anonymous, nor is she presented as morally inferior. Her emotions, fears, and ethical commitments are intelligible and carefully narrated. *This insistence on her humanity destabilizes the colonial hierarchy that depends on dehumanization to sustain itself.* The narrative may not openly resist empire, but it allows moments in which imperial authority appears ethically fragile.

Patriarchal power further narrows the space available to Imoinda. Decisions regarding her movement, her labour, and ultimately her life are made by men who operate within both colonial and gendered hierarchies. Behn's portrayal does not fully interrogate this dynamic, yet it does expose the tragic consequences of a world in which female survival depends upon male judgment. Imoinda's worth is acknowledged, but it does not translate into agency. Behn appears torn between admiration for Imoinda and acceptance of the narrative conventions that demand her sacrifice. Rather than

resolving this tension, the text leaves it exposed. Imoinda's suffering becomes a site where colonial and patriarchal violence intersect, revealing how systems of domination rely on the containment and eventual erasure of women's lives. Her tragedy does not redeem the empire or affirm authority; instead, it quietly underscores their human cost.

"They suffered the most miserable effects of slavery."

In this sense, *Oroonoko* reflects an early discomfort with domination rather than a coherent political critique. Behn's representation of Imoinda gestures toward an ethical recognition of injustice while remaining bound by the imaginative limits of her historical moment. The novel can mourn what it cannot change, and in doing so, it reveals both the possibilities and the failures of representing female dignity within early colonial literature.

Sacrifice, Tragedy, and the Limits of Authorial Imagination: Imoinda's death marks the emotional and ethical culmination of *Oroonoko*, yet it is also the point at which the limits of Behn's narrative imagination become most visible. The novel frames her death as a tragic necessity rather than deliberate injustice, a move that both mourns her suffering and contains its implications. While Behn clearly invites sympathy for Imoinda, the narrative ultimately resolves her story through sacrifice, *suggesting that survival for a woman like her remains unthinkable within the structures the text inhabits*. Importantly, this sacrifice is not portrayed as heroic rebellion or political resistance. Imoinda does not die to challenge the empire, nor is her death framed as a conscious act of defiance against colonial power. Instead, it emerges as the outcome of a world in which her choices have been steadily narrowed by enslavement, patriarchal authority, and narrative convention. Behn's emphasis on Imoinda's constancy and composure at this moment reinforces her moral strength, yet it also transforms her suffering into something almost inevitable, as though dignity itself demands erasure.

What makes this moment ethically unsettling is the way admiration coexists with closure. Behn praises Imoinda's endurance and emotional restraint, even acknowledging that she "deserved a better fate" (Behn *Oroonoko*), yet the narrative does not imagine such a fate. The possibility of Imoinda's continued life, autonomy, or future remains absent. This absence is not incidental. It reflects the broader inability of early colonial narratives to conceive of enslaved women beyond tragedy. Sympathy is extended, but liberation remains outside the horizon of representation.

Behn's authorial position complicates further. *Writing as a woman within a male-dominated literary culture, she appears acutely aware of injustice, yet constrained in how far she can push her critique*. Imoinda's sacrifice thus signals not only the violence of colonial and patriarchal systems, but also the boundaries of what could be imagined or articulated within seventeenth-century fiction. The tragedy lies as much in narrative limitation as in character fate. Seen through this lens, Imoinda's death is neither redemptive nor meaningless. It becomes a point at which the novel's ethical sympathies collide with its ideological constraints. Behn can recognize Imoinda's dignity and bravery, but she cannot secure her survival. The result is a portrayal that mourns what it cannot save, revealing the cost of empire and patriarchy while remaining trapped within their narrative logic.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Imoinda's portrayal in *Oroonoko* reflects Aphra Behn's ethical engagement with questions of female dignity and colonial domination within the limits of seventeenth-century narrative imagination. As a woman writer working inside patriarchal and imperial structures, Behn imagines Imoinda as morally strong, emotionally resilient, and worthy of admiration, even as her fate remains shaped by male authority and colonial violence. Imoinda's agency operates not through overt resistance but through ethical steadiness under extreme constraint, challenging reductive representations of enslaved women while exposing the narrow possibilities available to them. Her death does not resolve the injustices the novel depicts; instead, it leaves behind a sense of moral unease

that underscores the human cost of empire and patriarchal control. In this tension between recognition and limitation, *Oroonoko* reveals both the possibilities and the boundaries of early feminist representation.

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