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# **The Role And Significance Of The Narrator And Or Narrative Voice In Oroonoko By Aphra Behn And Virginia Wolff's To The Lighthouse**

I have selected Oroonoko by Aphra Behn and Virginia Wolff's To the Lighthouse.

In regards to Oroonoko, the Royal Slave by female author Aphra Behn is the first humanitarian English novel and actively opposes Slavery in a time when it was culturally accepted.

The role of any narrator regardless of the narration type used is, to tell a story in the way that the author wants his or her story to be understood by the reader with sympathy, understanding or connection with characters. There are various types of narration used by writers, including first person narrator which is a character in the story, second person narrator is generally believed to be a character in the text who is telling the story to another person. For Oroonoko, the Royal Slave is told through the lens of the third person omniscient narrator. This device is an extremely important method to use in that the third person omniscient, is an all knowing integral narrator explaining all of the character in the text's feelings, doing, thinking, as well as all the actions, locations, events, and dates. Omniscient narration is in charge of the reader, leaving very little room for an independent readers thought or discussion about what they are being told in the text.

Now Behn narrative is very personal though in the third person too but compared to Virginia Woolf's narrative voice in the novel To the Lighthouse that uses parts of a stream of consciousness as a narrative device via the main characters in the foreground, which you can know the full thoughts which can be rambling too. The story is divided into three sections: "The Window," "Time Passes," and "The Lighthouse (explain briefly what each one is by summary)

But with these interchanges the narration could be seen as not part of the story and anonymous, but her function to focus and observe the whole scene while progressing the story forward, less sympathetic or persuading you to make a moral judgement like Behn but just as important as your viewpoint of the characters themselves not the situation in history i.e. Slavery and the moral implications of this and attitudes. Woolf can be subjective when its needed and that makes the narrator have a double agency role of voice and focaliser. The narrator turns directly to the reader with rhetorical questions when needed, thus bringing the reader into the story as an observer and perhaps to shape opinions on the work and to reflect on the different ways of interpretation. Instead of just telling the reader what happened and invites dialogue, interpretation of ideas for the reader-i.e. a great use of imagery to create characters' conversations due to thought process illustrated in the narration itself.

The use of this technique in her literature used could be a coincidence based on her own true life due to several mental health breakdowns and suffering with bi-polar disorder at a time when it was not mentioned and seen as strictly a taboo subject in society. Her condition unfortunately led to her own demise while being institutionalised and a cause which in itself can create internal dialogue which is not present to see but felt or noticed, and people have many strong views on this due to cultural upbringing. In today's society we are more sympathetic to this

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condition, back in Woolf's time less so and worse the patriarchal attitude towards woman who were considered "manic depressive". In some ways this can make a reader feel uncomfortable or feel they are intruding in that world and characters thoughts.

The main narrative technique used by Woolf is free indirect discourse – a common part of this is the lack of a reporting verb, the narrator speaks for a character's point of view, rendered in third person.

Example: (show an example from the book of this technique)

The stresses of free indirect discourse (FID) as the representation of a certain character's perception that FID is the mode by which the narrator speaks for the character.

So unlike Woolf, Behn begins the story by stating that she was a partial witness to Oroonoko's experience "I was my self an Eye-Witness to a great part, of what you will find here set down" (p37) . She goes on to tell the reader that she met Oroonoko who told her about the parts of his story that she had not witnessed. This could suggest that Behn in fact is an unreliable narrator and her view of events are subjective and therefore questionable. She rationalises matters by uttering that she does not want to bother them "However pleasant to us" Oroonoko's experience "Where history is scare, and Adventure very rare; yet might prove tedious and heavy to my Reader".

Behn's narrative voice is that of someone in authority and has power of what she is prepared to tell her readers, and as a consequence the narrative power distance between the narrator and the readers is apparent and deliberately thoughtful in the opening paragraph. Power over the readers can be a risky strategy and requires the narrator to come across as genuine throughout the text. Claiming forcefully as Behn does to have witnessed the unfolding events is one way of overcoming any doubts that may arise in the reader's mind. Behn would have been aware that her subject matter that of a black man conducting himself in a civilised manner would have been the complete opposite view to that of the readers of the time of non-Europeans.

Now with Woolf, the mode of the narration, the reader is also presented as the narrators' point of view only, observations of a character in specific situations with access to deep interpretation. This technique allows the narrator to drift in and out of the minds of the characters and speak from their point of view which is polar opposite to Behn power of authority and righteousness as storyteller.

Woolf's written perspective floats and it is not clear whose voice is heard or whose point of view through the story is perceived, thus making the novel more challenging to read and since the idea shifts more than once in the same sentence. Sometimes a character's own voice can be distinguished by idiosyncrasies but rare due to not much direct dialogue is used in the novel unlike the voicing of the characters in Oroonoko which is radically different and rich in culturally ideology of the time unlike just well spoken English in Woolf's To the lighthouse.

Now with Behn's narrative voice in the description of life between the natives and colonists is daring, elaborate and colourful. She writes that the natives are advanced in terms of making craft items so detailed that they are worthy of being called art, which was an activity considered to be the preserve of an advanced society. Her stylistic technique is that of a writer drawing attention, championing the abilities of indigenous people who were normally thought of and

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depicted as uncivilised and primitive on every level. To do this she makes use of a literary technique called author intrusion. Author intrusion allows the author to rearrange the reader's flawed perception of others and by giving them the opportunity to learn from the narrator's autobiographical revelations about the achievement of a race located in far flung countries.

Now Woolf's multi-voice narration technique is loosely constructed round sentences for the reader and this means a passage may start with one or two sentences succinctly, then followed by a stream of consciousness nearly a page long, with a row of sub clauses in which commas, semicolons, dashes or brackets create shifts of voice. Punctuation used helps a reader understand the novel whereas otherwise it can become rather confusing.

The narrated monologue is used by characters to reveal inner lives of them and this develops through out the novel. The narrator places the characters in the foreground of the narrative and blends her voice with theirs. (Susan Dick) (1994:766)

This example is shown in "the dinner" scene where no words are spoken but several inner voices can be distinguished in the communicative act between Mr and Mrs Ramsay during the dinner party. One of many examples in *To the Lighthouse* where the character's voices blend, and the narrator in turn becomes objective storyteller to taking sides in the conversation. Perspectives shift between the narrator and Mr and Mrs Ramsay without definition of whose voice is clear at that time...The words within the two parentheses belong to the narrator who steps in to clarify the mode of communication and this seems over explicit to understand, however on a narrative level it functions as a reminder to the reader of the narrator's presence.

The reader gets to hear the voice in this example Mrs Ramsay a character perceives her Husbands frustration over Augustus Carmichael who asked for another plate of soup thereby delaying the main course for the whole party.

This can make the novel feel it goes nowhere or has even a point of interest unlike the foreshadowing technique that is clearly evident early in the text of *Oroonoko* which entices the reader from the beginning. Behn's positive stance continues with her description of Oroonoko whom she describes as showing great psychical courage during a recent war. She continues to describe him as having 'a greatness of Soul, followed by 'refined Notions of true Honour, absolute Generosity and 'that softness that was capable of the highest passions of Love and Gallantry" Here we see Behn' narrative voice attempt to normalise Oroonoko to her reading audience. The physical description of his appearance is shocking but understandable given the time and social norms of the society. She tells us his face not brown, or rusty black 'which most of that Nation are, but a perfect Ebony. This suggests that Behn is mindful of her readers and in order not to alienate them she adds that 'his nose was rising and Roman instead of African and flat which is a generalisation of Africans by Europeans, and that his mouth and lips had acceptable proportions 'far from those great turned up Lips, which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes. Perhaps in an attempt to please her readers Behn's narrative tone is that of a writer balancing her admiration of Oroonoko by revealing that he does not possess the appearance typical of his race. And goes on to tell us that except for his colour he was perfect in every sense. Later, we learn that Oroonoko's love for the beautiful Imoinda is being challenged by a rival king. As an omniscient narrator Behn is in the unique position of being able to tell the readers the thoughts and actions of the other characters. To convey the unfolding events, she resorts to conflict as a device to describe Oroonoko's reaction when he discovers that Imoinda has been taken by the king who wants her for himself. After an epic war we learn that Oroonoko

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is captured, sold into slavery and given a new name Caser.

Early on Behn refers the main protagonist as Gallant Slave which would have been shocking to the readers of time who saw slaves as not an equal on every level. Once more Behn returns to and persists with the narrative voice of balancing Oroonoko's intellectual brilliance and the trade in slavery as practiced by Europeans. She does this by overtly announcing that 'I ought to tell you that Christians never buy any slaves but they give 'em some Name of their own'. The contemporary reader will be aware that this statement is not accurate. It is now accepted that European Christians were heavily involved in the slave trade. Furthermore, her tone of emphasising the differences continues by declaring that native names are 'likely very barbarous, and hard to pronounce' Once more the tone is that of appeasing the readers of the time. To accomplish her view that Oroonoko is a great man despite his current circumstances as a slave she tells us that his new name is Caeser this is a literary technique known as archetype in that Caser is a high standing historical name in which her readers can relate to and therefore normalise him, and makes it easier to accept him.

## Conclusion

In essence, Onorooko is a protest novel against the detrimental treatment of the other by those in society who hold economic power. Behn uses the all-knowing all wise narrator as her way of telling the reader that the other in society is just as cable of achieving greatness as the people around them. Intellectual attainment, kindness, beauty and responsible leadership is not the preserve of one race or gender. As a female writer which would have been a rarity at the time of publication some suggest that Behn was thinking about her own gender and how a male dominated society had a negative impact on woman purely because they were women.

Now with To the lighthouse it feels completely different overall and the story is maybe not so vivid or interesting as Onorooko to an average reader and the only similarity to the Behn novel of Woolfs is using the third person narrative. But the style is more detailed inviting the reader to have an opinion on characters and create their own dialogue for characters and personality traits, this makes it more challenging to read for the average reader and in that regard enjoyable more academically. In some cases, the story could be seen as much about nothing compared to the richness and message in Onorooko and the narration is perhaps more interesting then the story itself.