Exploration अन्वेषण
A Peer-Reviewed Multidisciplinary Journal
ISSN 2542-2944 (Print)
Published by the Research Management Cell
Darchula Multiple Campus, Khalanga, Darchula
Far Western University, Nepal

From Pin to Pole: Building an Empire in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*

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Abstract

Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (1719) has long been considered one of the earliest works in the literary canon and one of the foundational novels in English. Yet beneath its narrative of survival and resourcefulness is an attitude of colonialism which reflects the values of the British Empire-building project of the eighteenth century. This essay examines how the story presents issues of hierarchy, binary perception, and the colonial context and psyche of the protagonist through a postcolonial lens, using the theories of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Frantz Fanon, and thus recalls the subsequently developed British Empire. The powerfully negative treatment of the Aboriginal subject, the concern for the superiority of European culture, and Crusoe's treatment of Friday are discussed as the beginnings of colonial agency-coloniser dynamics. In employing the qualitative method, the analysis focuses on the viewpoints offered by "Orientalism," "mimicry," and "the subaltern" in explicating Defoe's narrative techniques. Robinson Crusoe enjoys personal liberties, but the study reveals the exploitative and domineering qualities of the coloniser. This twofold perception indicates that the work has the potential to act both as a vehicle for colonial myths and as a demonstration of human fortitude. Central to the concluding thoughts of the article is the appropriateness of a postcolonial viewpoint in contemplating the European imperial legacy as well as its critical-literary context.

Keywords: *Civilisation, colonial attitudes, empire, subjugation, postcolonial*

Introduction

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) has usually been regarded as a narrative concerning human inventiveness, adventure, and independence. An Englishman who has been

locked on a desert island for twenty-eight years practically survives by being inventive and laborious. The novel, much as it merely reads like a tale of survival, is a universal text which is very closely related to the imperialism of its day. Literature in general is instrumental in shaping and sustaining imperial ideology, said critics such as Said (1978). Not only has Defoe's figure in Robinson Crusoe survived, however, but he has built up a system of government for his island, he is engaged in agriculture, and he exercises absolute sway over somebody else, non-Europeans, in other words, Friday. According to the post-colonial view, in fact, Crusoe's actions upon his island can be likened to those of European colonialism, since it involves the taking possession of land, the slavery of native peoples, and the culture and worship of Europe. Colonial narratives invariably portray the colonised subject as one in need of the guide and control of the coloniser, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2002). This relationship is well illustrated in the one that exists between Crusoe and Friday, since in this relationship Crusoe assumes the position of moral and cultural superior; the relationship must be assumed, being based on a disparity of power. It is not so much the personal relationship between Crusoe and Friday, however, as the fact that the book provides a broader ideological situation in which European domination is portrayed as a natural phenomenon, rational and civilising, while the indigenous or non-European 'Other' is rendered invisible or subservient.

Further emphasising the imperial aspects of the story are its historical settings. Britain's mercantilist interests and increased desire for world trade markets led her to exploit her colonial possessions in America, in Africa, and in East India at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The basis of the moral, religious, and intellectual arguments for colonisation in those days was the disposition to "civilise" the non-European peoples. Loomba (2015) indicates that these views are fairly reflected in the literature of the early eighteenth century, where the expansion of Europe is conceived as a cultural manifestation and a moral enterprise. So far, *Robinson Crusoe* has become both a source of amusement and a literary expression of modern imperialism, and it itself pictures colonisation as a moral and practical achievement.

By associating the colonisation of space with economic exploitation of it, the novel also brings in new ideas of capitalism. Crusoe illustrates that quality of economic reasonableness which represents the early capitalist conception of things, in the way he regulates the island on which he is stranded, its resources, and the work he does. Aravamudan (1999) observes that Robinson Crusoe presents landownership as a means of personal security and wealth achievement, while narrating at one and the same time individual survival and the logic of accumulation. Seen in this light, the novel may be interpreted as a point of departure for colonial and economic ideas, where gain by individuals is rendered possible by cultural and moral supremacy. The latter point for the analysis of these factors in the novel will reveal grave implications in the post-colonial criticism that will be essayed. The works of authors such as Spivak (1988) and Bhabha (1994) insist on the necessity of the cooperation and subordination of the colonised by the coloniser, such that colonial power is never total. The tensions of colonial relationships—wherein the coloniser claims superiority, yet is reliant on the labour, knowledge and compliance of the colonised—are particularly recognised in Bhabha's concept of ambivalence. The idea of the subaltern, according to Spivak, is indicative of the systematic annulment of the voices of the native, showing how stories such as Robinson Crusoe produce and perpetuate epistemic hierarchies. Taken together, these concepts furnish a reading that resolves to expose the power structures, implicit and manifest, of the narrative. The novel's relation to the spheres of language, religion and cultural convention points to the

ambiguity of imperial ideologies. Crusoe's imposition of English, the teaching of the European religion and the forms of government which he adopts are products of a total system of cultural domination. This is echoed in previous colonial ventures of codifying social codes, language and religion as instruments of control and assimilation. These readings show that Robinson Crusoe is a product more of the ideological periphery of empire than a tale of solitude and resourcefulness.

The aim of this research, therefore, is to examine *Robinson Crusoe* from the point of view of postcolonial theory and its implications for how colonial relationships are produced, how racial and cultural differences are presented, and how the narrative works to legitimise imperial power. This study will employ a qualitative textual analysis based on postcolonial concepts such as mimicry, Orientalism, hybridity and subalternity to illustrate how Defoe's works both reflect and affirm the colonial imagination, and to highlight the contradictions and tensions embodied in these narratives. It seeks to place a text such as Robinson Crusoe in terms of both its historical moment and as a place of critical investigation in order to understand the continuing cultural and ideological effects of European colonisation.

Methods and Procedures

The primary text to be examined during the course of the study is *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and it will be pursued by means of the qualitative textual analysis types of examination. The theoretical foundation for this analysis will be supplied by postcolonial theory in general, and, in particular, the writings of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Frantz Fanon, and other significant postcolonial theorists. The method of pursuing the analysis will be by a close reading of appropriate passages from the text that illustrate colonial attitudes, racial representations, and cultural hierarchies. This will involve studying several of Crusoe's encounters with Friday, Crusoe's treatment of the island as property, Crusoe's other encounters with people of non-European backgrounds, and, also important, the authorial commentaries, diction, and narrative voice functioning as means of concealing colonial ideology. The insights accruing from the writings of theorists such as Said's *Orientalism* have been employed to analyse the primary text so as to see how the cultural differences being represented are being constructed, and how the European superiority is operating. Spivak's essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", deals with the silencing of native voices in colonial narratives of events, while Bhabha's work "The Location of Culture" discusses the ideas of hybridism, mimicry and ambivalence in colonial discourse, and Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in The Empire Writes Back, gives a more thorough account of colonial discourse and language. It will also survey the narrative episodes of *Robinson Crusoe,* and then estimate to what extent this theme has been studied. The extent to which the novel involved itself in imperial discourse and the influence that it has had on the cultural perceptions will be interpreted by information that has been established by theories, and also by textual perception. The interpretive lens presupposes that literature works to generate cultural meanings in concert with, or contrary to, the prevailing ideologies — rather than remaining neutral (Loomba, 2015). The lens through which we will examine how narrative techniques, characterisation, and cultural assumptions reflect and sustain imperial attitudes is a combined reading of Robinson Crusoe as a literary artefact and a historical document. The present study intends to provide an extensive post-colonial reading of Defoe's work by applying textual, theoretical and historical analysis.

Results and Discussion

Crusoe's settlement of the island exemplifies the colonial prototype of European settlement and dominion, since it embraces something more than mere survival. His systematic occupation of the island, which comprised covering it with buildings, planting crops, subjecting animals to domestication, and his fixation of personal boundaries, is an example of the conversion of nature into a controlled and hence usable state. This is in keeping with Locke's (1690/1988) Labour Theory of Property, which expresses the theory that ownership is justified by improvement. Post-colonially, Crusoe's acts denote the Eurocentric growth which places European intervention to be in itself productive, and morally justified (and hence legitimate), thus naturalising land conquest through labour and cultivation (Ashcroft et al., 2002). Furthermore, the renaming of the island and its topography by Crusoe is a symbolic act of possession rather than an organisational one. Such naming is a colonial operation, whereby, through obliteration of prior claims or histories, identity is imprinted upon space. According to Said (1978), renaming and mapping are the impressions of symbolic ownership which allow the coloniser to reconceptualise the 'different' world to his own standards of Europeanisation. In Crusoe's case, therefore, the island becomes an ordered and manipulated environment whereby he is free to exert governance and a cultural order without external opposition, and consequently becomes a part of the European epistemic structure. The transformation of the island into a microcosm of European social structures not only indicates land management but also the imposition of authority and hierarchy. He creates a social cosmology comparable to the imperial administration of colonies, putting himself in the position of head of the state and fixing a regulated routine of government, resembling the hierarchical government of the European association of societies (Loomba, 2015). His auto-fashioning supplies the double aspect of the colonial subject, the agent as well as the instrument of imperialistic ideology, as ruler and as civiliser. The colonial relation of master and subaltern is, in a nutshell, given in the introduction of Friday. Crusoe’s prompt renaming and introduction of Friday and the incorporation of English and European costumes are the methods of erasing the savage identity. This is the silencing of the absolutely subaltern, according to Spivak (1988), for the discourse of the colonial attitude takes the place of the indigenous knowledge systems and cultural alternatives. Friday’s voice is subaltern in the narrative, being productive only of the prevailing narrative in the story of Crusoe, which perpetuates a power relation which is ever-present and optimal for the coloniser’s view of supremacy.

To understand the ambivalent relationship between Crusoe and Friday, we require an understanding of Bhabha's (1994) theory of mimicry. Crusoe attempts to create closeness and loyalty through teaching Friday to use the language, dress and religion of Europe, creating a subject who represents the values of Europe but who is still, typically, marked as different. The identity of the coloniser cannot be entirely recreated while, at the same time, preserving the supremacy of the hierarchy, which is what this 'almost the same, but not quite' is suggestive of. Friday's mimicry thus reveals the divergences in power relations emerging out of colonisation, while, at the same time, functioning as a mode of acceptance and protest. Fanon (1963) highlights the psychological ramifications of this dependence: the colonised internalises the superiority of the coloniser, thus leading to obedience and loyalty, which sustains a mode of cultural domination. Friday is the typical example of the working of this model, since the structural and coercive forces which underlie his assimilation are masked by the construction of his submission as the moral and

virtue-laden outcome of the events cued up in the narrative. By framing the repression of cultural identity as necessary in the pursuit of the maintenance of social and moral order, we see that the tale thus rationalises hierarchy.

Crusoe's insistence that Friday become a Christian is a clear case of cultural imperialism. It is the "civilising mission" that gives the European ascendancy and cultural superiority a universal justification by adopting Western religion as the underpinning of ethics (Loomba, 2015). Since, in the story, conversion and colonisation go hand in hand, and since spiritual salvation implies an acceptance of European ethics and ideas, Defoe recreates the epistemic hierarchy that underpins imperial expansion by equating Christianity with civilisation. A prominent aspect of European colonial ventures in Africa, Asia, and America was the mission work, which had nearly always the economic and political preponderance as its basis (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991). Religious education, for instance, is to be regarded as not only a moral safeguard, but also as a means of control, as a formative influence on Friday's personality, to bring him into the colonial structure. This ambiguity of temporal and spiritual power is a reflection of a general imperial policy, in which religion is a theory of government as well as a principle.

Crusoe views the island as an economic asset and approaches it in a colonial and proto-capitalist manner, considering the way he approaches resource allocation, farming, and husbandry. This has been noted by Said (1993) as belonging to the historical relationship between the capitalist accumulation of wealth and the alienation of land, whereby the alienated land is a colony and the political and economic dominion of the coloniser. Crusoe even has a slave in the character of Friday. Despite the apparent moral and civilising purpose of the endeavours, Friday is a colonised subject who, as a result of his economic productivity, works for the civilising of the island, Crusoe's economic rationalisation. Loomba (2015) discusses the framework of slave, indigenous and colonial exploitation as a framework of rape to produce surplus for European economies. In a way, the narrative focuses on economic rationality, colonisation, and the capitalist structure in a positive and ‘civilised’ manner. Defoe's systematic exclusion of the indigenous population of the island is alarming. This exclusion materialises in grotesque forms, whereby colonised ghosts pose threats. This has been described by Spivak (1988) as colonised silencing.

The island lacks indigenous representation, further supporting colonial ideologies regarding how non-European territories are treated as non-existent, unused, or inactive places in the world. The Island, as a European projection, becomes a blank slate. The work normalises the imposition of the European political, cultural, and economic order, as well as the authoritarian, Eurocentric delineation of the ‘pre-historical’ in the order of evidence, and in the sanctioning of authority, or legitimation, of the character of Crusoe. The most evident accounts of colonial authority are, however, interrupted and challenged by Crusoe's reliance on Friday. Friday's labour, knowledge, and partnership are, of course, indispensable to Crusoe, especially in moments when he is in crisis or when he is socially threatened on account of his would-be claim to social order. The dependence of Crusoe on Friday does, however, primarily address the colonial structure and, to some extent, the presumed sovereign authority of the colonial power. Crusoe's reliance on Friday is indeed the most fragile of all colonial structures; the power relationship could hardly stand together with the dependence. Circa structures emphasise the relationship and alter the unbounded imposition of empire that would primarily be subsequent to the figure of Crusoe. Beyond providing a compelling story, Robinson Crusoe serves a further ideological goal that promotes the claimed positive aspects of colonisation. The narrative praises the virtues of

diligence, morality, and commercial enterprise while sanitising the violent conquests of colonial settlement. Literature has, and continues to, normalise the exercise of European dominion and authority for the sake of empire. As the empire's historian, Defoe portrays a colonisation that is both moral and essential, contributing to such a tradition of literature.

This ongoing obsession arguably shapes perceptions of colonial history and canonises the novel's imperialist values. The ethical examination of colonialism is made more difficult by Defoe's conquest and narratives of subsumptive dominance, framed as adventure and survival, that normalise the extreme coercion and exploitation of history. In Robinson Crusoe, the language of power assumes a distinct form. The teaching of Friday English, aside from its role in communication, serves as a means of controlling the coloniser's culture and thought. In colonial contexts, the control of language assimilation operates, as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002) put it, on perception and eliminates other forms of knowledge. The lack of Friday's native tongue is akin to the lack of other forms of thought, storytelling, and knowledge. The consequences of control of language, described by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) as the coloniser's control of reality, are the ultimate reshaping of other possible worlds. This violence of language points to the novel's participation in the more extensive processes of cultural erasure that are part of colonialism (Spivak, 1988). The island also serves, from the perspective of European colonial aspirations, as a closed laboratory. Quest, Questor 97 No European institutions (to begin with) – becomes a site for Crusoe to exercise power, loot resources and organise imperialist social structures (Pratt, 1992). The island's tame preserves, protected areas, and "untamed" lands also work to confirm European notions of orderliness, civilisation, and authority by mirroring the spatial separation found in colonial settlements. Crusoe's kingdom is a kind of micro-European empire. A version of European imperial structures. Crusoe acts as the ruler and Enlightenment judge, while Friday observes his subordinate role through labour and reflexive rule-following. Accordingly, the island can be used as an illustration of how European political, labour and systems of cultural imposition worked in colonial situations.

Crusoe is programmed by fear and uses it as an expensive driver to control. Savage animals, cannibalism and the unknown are representations of dangers that justify Crusoe's authority. This depiction of the colonised as brutish, irrational and degenerate is often used to justify intervention (Said 1978). Cannibals are represented in the novel as being grotesque and subhuman, while a testament to Friday's so-called humanity is his compliance with European norms. Setting up a moral hierarchy and explaining away dominance, this mechanism makes European power civilising, but also protective. Accordingly, the moral justification for colonisation by fear and otherness. Later, in the book, there are ambivalent passages despite its colonial perspective. Crusoe obliquely condemns unmediated authority by his respect for Friday and occasional acknowledgement of his reliance on him (Bhabha, 1994). Crusoe's loneliness also reveals the psychological damage done to colonial agents abroad, in terms of their isolation as well as the emotional costs of empire building (Fanon, 1963). These nuances remind us that colonial discourses are not unproblematic or uniform: rather, they express the tangled destinies of coloniser and colonised and act out relationships between power, dependency, and identity. Postcolonial scholarship has revisioned Robinson Crusoe as a site of contested ideologies rather than an ideologically neutral adventure. Although ones that investigate and disassemble the narrative structures used to suppress the colonised begin, for example, with J. M. Coetzee's 1986 novel Foe (in which characters who have been silenced speak themselves out of silence). Loomba

(2015) observes something similarly contemporary in criticism, picking up on the novel's role in the legitimation of empire but also on the alienated and suppressed subjects it depicts.

These reworkings demonstrate that Crusoe is not only an ephemeral novelist of colonial discourse (125) but also how the literature itself can both represent a historical context and be used to critically engage with imperial ideology. The novel foregrounds epistemic violence that underpins the colonial discourse by systematically suppressing indigenous agency. The Caribs have no social, political or cultural depth; they are simply dangers (Spivak 1988; Bhabha 1994). Crusoe, by restricting the colonised to the status of being mere subjects who are determined entirely by European paradigms, maintains their status through controlling historical consciousness and creating a narrative structure based on control of representation. Crusoe's return to Europe and his claim of wealth from his Brazilian plantation illustrate how economic aspiration is a function of colonial pursuit. As Aravamudan (1999) observes, the novel associates land ownership with producing wealth even as it tells tales of survival and capitalist accumulation. This is the basic economic 'rationality' of colonialism: it's moral and determined logic being primarily one of cultural-enabling to facilitate the extraction of surplus from other economies (Fanon, 1963).

Conclusion

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* has strong ties to the ideological constructs of European imperialism, as this post-colonial analysis shows. The basic practices of colonial domination as witnessed in the story are embodied in Crusoe's naming and conversion of Friday, the making of the island into his own personal colony, and in the obliteration of the histories of the natives. The story serves to rationalise the hierarchies of empire as being the rational, moral, and unavoidable results of European presence abroad. In following the course of the text, it is perceived how the imperial authority is upheld by the points of view of Said's *Orientalism*, Bhabha's mimicry and ambivalence, Spivak's subaltern silenced and Fanon's indictment of colonial psychology. Crusoe's relation with Friday shows clearly the contradictions of colonialism itself through the contradictions between dominance and dependency. Although Robinson Crusoe is generally considered a story of survival and genius, its ideological ramifications indicate a more nuanced and troubling legacy. As a work of literature, it is, therefore, a classic, and it is also the record of a colonial discourse which shaped and endorsed the imperialist point of view of the time. If we reread the novel in the light of post-colonial theory, we can, with the historical complicity of the novel confronted, demur from its narration, which in part will ensure that the voices it silences come back into critical focus.

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