

Finding Colonialism/Imperialism in *Robinson Crusoe*

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Abstract

Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe deals with the sea-faring, adventurous life of the protagonist by the self same name. But behind the simple story of shipwreck and survival on an uninhabited island, the novel manifests many aspects of colonialism/imperialism. The fact that Robinson Crusoe is a colonial figure is revealed in the text in different ways. The novel carries forward the project of colonialism/imperialism through various actions and discourses of its narrator. Colonialism manifests itself mainly through the treatment of Man Friday, his slave on the island. Though Crusoe rescues the savage from a barbarous cannibalistic ceremony and gives the life of a civilized man, colonialism runs slyly behind this rescuing act. The colonial enterprise in the text is specifically propelled forward by the employment of such strategic tools of imperialism as language, culture, religion, race, ethnicity etc. The colonial discourses scattered across the text reveal such dichotomies as Occident/Orient, Black/White, Race/Ethnicity, Christian/Pagan, etc.

Key words: colonial, discourses, language, religion, savage, Orient.

Robinson Crusoe (1719), a classic by Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), isn't simply a gripping adventure story of a shipwrecked sailor who is the eponymous narrator of the story. The novel shows how Crusoe as an economic individualist and later on as a colonist gains colonial or imperial hold over a paradisaal island inhabited by the "uncouth savages". The novel, especially its latter part tries to uphold the superior cultural, religious, moral values of the European Whites who claim themselves to be belonging to the Occidental nations and who think themselves to be morally, culturally, economically superior to the "Orient". The dichotomies colonizer/colonized, centre/periphery, master/servant, Christian /Pagan, Whites/Blacks, Occident/Orient express themselves obliquely in the colonial discourses scattered over the text. Though a travelogue, the celebrated novel speaks volumes of colonial/imperial frame of mind both of its author and narrator. As a colonial text, *Robinson Crusoe* tries to spread Eurocentric notions of culture and religion among the "colonial Others". The relationship between the colonizer and the colonized as the text exemplifies is not only one of subordination and subjugation but one of acceptance and appropriation. Like a typical coloniser, Crusoe employs deftly language and religion as imperial means to attain his colonial ends. As a colonial master, he refers to Man Friday and the other savage people as his "subjects". In fact the novel is an allegorical representation of an imperialist venture and enterprise. On the occasion of bi-centenary publication of the novel, Virginia Woolf

observed that the book so “resembles one of the anonymous productions of the race itself rather than the effect of a single mind”.

That Crusoe is a colonial figure comes to the fore upfront in the text. His colonial temperament is expressed in his indomitable desire to take voyage into different parts of the World for the trading enterprises. The colonial masters undertake sea voyages into the underdeveloped countries for business purposes. While conducting businesses in those countries, they gradually make their way into the governance and try to colonise the people who are their “subjects”. Robinson Crusoe, like a colonist undertakes sea voyages for raising his “Fortune and Estate”. On his voyage to Guinea, he is taken prisoner into Salle, a port belonging to the moors. While escaping tactfully from Salle, he tosses the moor with him into water on the ground that he is not worthy of his trust. This kind of treatment of a moor is very much colonial. At the same time Crusoe agrees to take Xury, a boy moor, along with him because the latter knows English, the language of the colonial masters and of course, vows to forsake his own religion and embrace Christianity. Here, too, is revealed Crusoe's colonial frame of mind. Xury is here “the colonial Other” who calls Crusoe as his colonial master. Crusoe tries to appropriate him into Eurocentric notions of culture and religion. While in Brazil his imperialistic mentality comes to the fore as he raises his “Plantation and Settlement” there by buying Negroes i.e, the black- skinned people from Africa. Raising plantation with the help of the black slaves is a cornerstone to the establishment and expansion of colonialism/imperialism in the Oriental countries.

Crusoe's reaction to the “Foot print” on the desert island of which he has been the sole possessor for fifteen years, is in a way expressive of his imperial frame of mind .He instantaneously could have been delighted at the sight of a human foot print as he is a “Solitaire” with “no Soul to speak to”, to relieve him on that desolate island. Instead he gets apprehended as he considers the foot print as a threat to his hegemony over the island as a whole. The colonial masters always try to hegemonize their colonies and in their process of hegemonisation, they cannot brook any rivalry. Crusoe has already started seeing the island as his colony and himself to be the lone possessor of it. So , he thinks the foot print as belonging to some other who may lay claim to his sole colonial enterprise in the paradisaical island. Crusoe, after having established his habitation in one part of the island, starts expanding the frontier of his colony. He everyday goes about exploring it and in a way possessing it. When his colony gets larger, he, like a typical imperialist, sets up a “Country House” in another part of the island to look after it. Crusoe’s colonial mindset comes to the fore when he rescues a savage from a “Mans Eating Ceremony” and christens him Man Friday later on. His fancy to have some savages as his slaves for menial jobs is very much colonial.

The colonial masters consider the people living outside the periphery of Eurocentric notions of civilization and culture as “savages” who are the “white men's burden”. They also claim that the task to civilize these savages who are the “colonial Others” is entrusted with them. Like a typical coloniser the first word Crusoe teaches Man Friday is “master”. Here he applies the typical strategic tool of the colonizers; the language. The imperialists, first of all, try to impose their own language on the colonized so that their superiority over the latter is

firmly established. Man Friday is the colonial “Other” in the text and Crusoe is his colonial master. Crusoe, like a true colonist, undertakes initiatives to civilize the savage in terms of the culture and language the Occidental nations nurture and uphold. Crusoe ‘s first introduction of the word “master” to the uncouth, “Oriental” Man Friday initiates the colonial process of his subjection, servitude and Submission to his colonial master. As a typical colonial figure, Crusoe treats Friday, the savage, as the white man’s burden and takes initiatives to educate him in the Eurocentric standard of living. He teaches Man Friday to shake off his cannibalistic traits. He makes him understand that the habit of eating human flesh is an abominable one and puts him among the European norms of civility and culture which are nothing but “ideological constructs”. When the brutish Man Friday picks up more or less the language of his colonial master Crusoe takes up a colonial discourse with him to shake off his own religion. The religion, culture, along with the language are the ideological state apparatuses which the colonial masters take recourse to for the successful pursuance of their imperial enterprises in the colonies. The imperialists always insist that the language spoken by them and the religion and the culture professed by them are superior to those of the colonized. They are of the view that the colonized would have to embrace the language, culture and the religion of their colonial masters if they are to appropriate themselves into the European canons of civility and humanity.

Crusoe puts his feet in the shoes of the colonial masters when he begins to instruct Man Friday in the knowledge of true God. He discursively persuades Friday to believe that their God Benamuckee is a cheat, fraud and Jesus Christ is the true God, the Saviour, the Redeemer of the wretched and the World. He enters into a long discourse with him about the Devil, the Original of him, his rebellion against God, his enmity to man, the reason of it, his setting himself up in the dark parts of the world to be worshipped instead of God. He, then, introduces Man Friday to the Christian notions of Hell and Heaven, which are typically White European and therefore colonial. As part of his colonial strategy, Crusoe gradually leads Friday from his dark paganism to the light of true religion which is Christianity and gets the conversion of the barbarous man completed. Crusoe’s description of Europe, especially of England, is highly discursive and an ideologically constructed one which is delivered to put himself on a superior pedestal in the eyes of the inferior Friday who is living far away from the centre of civilization and culture which typically belong to the White European nations, or the Occidental nations to which the colonial masters belong.

Colonialism tries to spread the light of knowledge, religion and culture in the “dark parts of the world”. According to Crusoe, Man Friday belongs to such dark parts of the world and Friday's initiation into the light of true knowledge, religion and culture is very much a colonial enterprise which he undertakes in the desolate island. Crusoe's imperial venture in the island becomes a success when Man Friday, so much colonized in and out, doesn’t even wish to go to his own country without him when the opportunity comes. Crusoe, then, rescues a Spaniard and Friday’s father from the man eating ceremony, which is a barbarous one, and colonizes them. After this, he refers to the island as “My Island” which is rich in “subjects”. He starts considering himself to be the colonial king of the island which he claims to be his own “meer Property” and over which he exercises an undoubted “Right of Dominion”. He

also thinks himself to be the absolute “Lord and Law-giver” and his people in the island are perfectly subjected or colonized and they all owe their lives to him. Here the colonialism/imperialism in *Crusoe* reaches a high water mark.

Colonialism in *Robinson Crusoe* is not merely one of subjugation or subjection of the colonized by the colonizers. It is one of acceptance and appropriation of the “colonial Other” into the civilization and culture of the colonial masters as well. This is amply clear when *Crusoe* takes *Man Friday* along with him on his return journey to home. *Friday*, the savage living beyond the ken of Occidental culture is thus appropriated into the White European society as he takes up the language, culture, and religion of his colonial masters. The strain of colonialism/imperialism becomes obvious towards the very end of the text. When *Crusoe* leaves the island, he passes the colonial button to his Spanish successors who continue their colonial rule in it. When he is appointed a private trader to the East Indies, an establishment which is highly responsible to sow the seeds of colonialism/imperialism across the “Oriental” nations including India, he visits his new colony in the island and sees a considerable improvement being made upon it by his Spanish successors who have brought eleven men and five women from the main land of the savages and colonized them. *Crusoe*, on this visit, also finds his island being peopled with twenty young children who are in the line to be colonized. He, during his twenty days stay on the colony, divides it into various parts and gives the Spaniards those parts they like to have but reserves to himself the property of the whole. When he gets back at the “*Brasils*”, he sends a good cargo of necessaries and supplies to his colony for Plantation work. Thus, *Crusoe*, like a seasoned colonial master continues to colonize his newly established colony even from his home through his Spanish colonial agencies.

Colonialism tries to project the Orient in its own parameters. There remains a hiatus in its representation and reality. The Orients are not actually what they are presented to be in the colonial texts. In *Robinson Crusoe*, *Crusoe* describes the colour of his own face “not so *Mollela* like”, even when he gets tanned, being exposed to the scorching heat of the sun on the island. Here colour politics comes into play, which is another strategic tool in colonialism. The complexion of all the Orient people are homogeneously depicted as that of a *Mollela* irrespective of their differential shades. To the colonists, all the people from the East are *Mollela*. This homogeneous representation of the oriental people helps the colonizers to carry forward black/white dichotomy. So the picture of the East is more of an artificially constructed one, not a really natural one.

Race and ethnicity play a key role in colonialism. Race refers to the white race of people living in the Occidental nations and the people living in the Orient belong to the ethnic group. In colonialism, race and ethnicity are binary opposites and race is superior while ethnicity is inferior. In *Robinson Crusoe* there is found a dichotomy between race and ethnicity all through. *Crusoe* is the representative of the race and all the dark-skinned people he encounters on his voyages and on the desolate island represent ethnicity. On his escape journey from *Salle*, the description of the naked dark-skinned people on the shores highlights race/ethnicity clash. The race/ethnicity binary is displayed on the island as *Man Friday* and all savage people are depicted as belonging to some ethnic group.

Mimicry is another important aspect of colonialism/imperialism. The colonial masters always try to make the colonized imitate them in every possible way. In *Robinson Crusoe*, Crusoe tries to make his slave Man Friday imitate his language, culture, and religion, being the savage's colonial master. Friday wholeheartedly involves himself in the process of mimicry initiated by his master and gets colonized in the process. In short, in *Robinson Crusoe*, Crusoe's colonial enterprise is one of such potency that he transforms an asocial, apolitical, uninhabited island into a colony with the colonial rules and regulations firmly imposed on it.

Work Consulted

Defoe, Daniel. *Robinson Crusoe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972.