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Representation and the Process of Legitimating the Appropriation of Space in Daniel Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe"

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Abstract:
The relationship between the ex-colonised and ex-coloniser is still enmeshed with unresolved tensions. Part of these tensions resulted from the gap of understanding between both camps, which was itself a result of inadequate representations, particularly in literary works. In the context of the 18th century overseas exploration and colonisation, Daniel Defoe wrote a novel, Robinson Crusoe, that set the literary standards for writing about non-Europeans. In his representations of those peoples and lands, he gave vent to all the typical European prejudices about them in a negative image, and pointed subtly to some of their aspects but not others in a way that was meant to legitimise the appropriation of those territories and people by Europeans. This paper explores how these representations work and to what extent they shaped the relationship between coloniser/colonised. This task is carried by the reliance a close reading of the text as a method, in the light of the theories of Frantz Fanon and Edward Said.

Keywords:representation, colonization, image, appropriation, legitimation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The process of overseas explorations that started in the 16th and 17th centuries led to the meeting of peoples of different races, cultures, and more importantly of people in different stages in their technological advancement. Exploration then became colonisation causing the exploitation of natural

resources and the oppression of people later on. This unhappy meeting of the 'races' had different causes and consequences. One of the main causes is the manner these 'other' people were represented by Europeans.

When the first European adventurers started touring the world, accounts of their voyages were transcribed as 'tales', 'romances', etc.… and eventually these accounts took the form of the new literary genre, novels. Novels and other travel accounts shared the same goals of entertaining and informing, but due to its parable-like style, deep meaning, and ideological underpinnings, novels were more enduring and influential. One of the first to tackle the subject of overseas exploration and colonisation was Daniel Defoe in what is considered the first English novel, *Robinson Crusoe* 1719. In this respect, it seems appropriate to mention Aimé Césaire's (2001) formula in his that, "no one colonises innocently" (p. 39), to which one can reply, "that no one writes about colonisation innocently". Therefore, this seemingly adventure novel provided the basis of the literary tradition the "*Robinsonade*", and had immense impact that still resonate today. The present article attempts answering the question of how did early European colonisers legitimise their actions of appropriating new lands and enslaving people.

The question is answered by exposing in the first part the historical context of these explorations and the rise of the novel. Then the second and third parts discuss how appropriation of the labour of foreign people and their land is justified through processes of literary representation.

2. Context: Colonialism, Overseas Exploration and Literature

The Geographical explorations of the 16th century drove European powers to a savage process of empire building on a large scale. This was the beginning of what might be called the 'age of imperialism'. Edward Said(1994) defines imperialism as "thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others. For all kinds of reasons it attracts some people and often involves untold misery for others"(p. 03). In a similar vein, Mattingly (2011) defines 'empire' as "rule over very wide territories and many peoples largely without their consent" (p. 06). Thus, imperialism led to empire-building, and smallest units of this process were 'colonies', from which there is the term 'colonialism'. Of this, E. Said (1994) says, "colonialism, which is always a consequence of "imperialism", is the implanting of settlements on distant territory" (p. 08). Through these processes, the world changed in dramatic ways and human relations were disturbed in ways that are still influencing contemporary world.

The discovery of the Americas started a rat race between the European nations to conquer this new unexploited world. Each country proceeded according to their means, objectives, and cultural background. By the 18th century, shares of this new world were carved up, and the setting up of colonies abroad was both a fashionable and often a lucrative economic enterprise. Informed by the ideals of the Enlightenment and adhering to the economic policy of mercantilism, the English applied themselves enthusiastically to the task of acquiring new overseas territories.

The trend of colonisation had many proponents in England, proponents who saw this expansion as their country's fate, its national destiny, which is divinely ordained, and on a more concrete level as an economic necessity, in order to keep with the pace of other European rivals. At the encounter of these two worlds (Europeans and indigenous), Europeans formed their own view of these newly discovered peoples. The representation of these indigenous as barbarians and savages served as another argument for Europeans to justify their benevolent "civilising conquests". Underlying this argument is the idea of the racial superiority of the white European man, and particularly the English.

Already in the early 17th century, Shakespeare's character Caliban in *The Tempest* (1611) provides a testimony of the image of a non-European in a literary work. Such images had tremendous detrimental effects because they would contribute to the construction of the distorted mythical image of these 'other' peoples in the imagination of English people. Moreover, the idea of lands without any people living on them was prevalent at the time of the discovery of the new world. Lands inhabited by heathen barbarians who lived in primitive conditions with no political organisation was attractive for the land-hungry and commerce-driven Englishmen. In this respect, the attitudes of the English in particular and Europeans in general can be captured in Frantz Fanon's words:

> "The white man wants the world; he wants it for himself alone. He finds himself predestined master of this world. He enslaves it. An acquisitive relation is established between the world and him" (1986, p. 128)

One advocate of expansionist and colony-establishing enterprises was Daniel Defoe. Born in 1660, Defoe witnessed pivotal events in England's history. He was also a contemporary of Newton (1642-1727), Locke (1632-1704), and many other quintessential Enlightenment figures. In his political writings in the periodical *The Review* (1704-1713), Defoe

ardently argued for the need of foreign trade, which would lead automatically to the founding of colonies (Aravamudan, 2008, p. 55). The language used bears testimony to the racial prejudice and the grudge he holds for non-Europeans. The usual terms to describe them were either 'savages' or 'barbarians'. Some texts even bear the traces of religious hatred as he writes, "Christians were being starved for the advantage of Muslims, who were being fed" (p. 51).

However, one quality of political or journalistic texts, when it comes to analysis, is that the intention of the author is made explicit both to informed and uniformed reader, there is no risk of falling into intentional fallacies. On the other hand, the problem lies in fictional works that are open to many interpretations, and which might conceal any insidious ideas under the veil of artistic license. Furthermore, the fact that a work of art cannot be put under the heading of right or wrong, moral or immoral, gives it enduring effect.

Daniel Defoe turned to writing novels late in his career. In fact, he is regarded as a pioneer in this genre as his *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) is considered the first English novel. At first, the work was purported to be an adventure novel since it recounted the aspirations of a typical young, middle-class, Englishman of the time. The reception was not welcoming from the literary milieu as Alexander Pope dismissed the works as a lower form of art (Hunter, 1996, p. 25). However, for the purpose of the present work, it is difficult to tell of the exact impact of the novel at the time of its publication considering that novels were not affordable, especially for economic reasons (p. 25) . It would be untenable to claim that such a work shaped the English colonial policy or something of this sort. Nonetheless, the novel is revelatory of the predominant ideas and thinking-paradigms of the time. Since the work went unheeded for its colonialist and imperialist undertones and was merely described as an adventure story. It even gave rise in literature to the tradition of the "*Robinsonade*", which suggest that it was more than accepted, it became a model.

The main character of the novel is a would-be merchant, representing the typical Englishmen of the time. this is not coincidental, for there was a belief that merchants, considering the nature of their work, are courageous because they are more exposed to danger, more likely to make discoveries of new routes and products, and knowledgeable of foreign people since they deal with them most of the time. Defoe himself expresses admiring views for this category of people, "A True-Bred Merchant is a Universal Scholar…He Understands Language, without Books, Geography without

Maps, his Journals and Trading-Voyages delineate the World, his Foreign Exchanges, Protests and Procurations, speak all Tongues…" (Aravamudan, 2008, p. 45). Portraying thus the main character as a merchant is a way of making his (i.e., the character) actions and judgements more trustworthy, and more attractive as model for young men to follow.

3. Appropriation and Legitimation: Dehumanising Foreign People

After embarking on his adventure, Robinson Crusoe's ship was captured by Moroccan 'pirates' near the city of Sallee. His lot was to become a slave to the sultan. This first encounter with non-Europeans yields some good depiction as the Moroccans are described as 'pirates' and 'rogues' (Defoe, 1994, p. 23). The sentence "the usage I had there was not so dreadful as at first I apprehended" (p. 23), suggests that there was already an expectation of the savage behaviour of the Moors as being merciless and cruel with their prisoners.

The first interesting contrast in the novel goes along with the first act of appropriation. When Robinson Crusoe made his escape from the Moroccan 'pirates', he released the older Moor and kept the more malleable Xury. The contrast is that when Robinson Crusoe was captured, he was not completely submissive, whereas when he takes Xury into his control, the boy "swore to be faithful to me …" (Defoe, 1994, p. 28), and the same will happen again with Friday who "sets my other foot upon his head …" (p. 202). The idea is that non-Europeans seem to accept their state of enslavement heartily, as if they had a natural predisposition to be enslaved and controlled. They recognise their inferiority and accept to be led by others. A similar depiction deprives non-Europeans of agency and makes them only followers. This image is sufficient justification to the domination, objectification, and enslavement of these peoples to the European readers of the time or even afterwards.

The second interesting group is the Africans met on the shore. First, there is this mention of cannibalism by Xury, "if wild mans come, they eat me…" (Defoe, 1994, p. 30) . Attributing such a quality to any person deprives them automatically of any traits of humanity. This can be is the extreme attack on one's humanity. Then, these Africans were, "quite black and stark naked" (p. 33), and showed no ability to express themselves except by beckoning. It was these Africans who fled at the two beasts on the beach, and it was only Robinson Crusoe with his courage and gun, the symbol of advancement and superiority, who killed them. In addition, the images of Africans (or as he called them 'Negroes') with their "lances" and

their eating of animals "I found quickly the Negroes were for eating the flesh of this creature" (p. 35), contribute to the construction of this negative image of black Africans as animal-like and enforces the already existing stereotype of them as being savages and uncivilised. Such images work in an indirect way as a further justification for colonial ventures and the infamous slave trade.

This representation of non-westerners is evocative of what E. Said (2003)refers to as one feature of 18th century orientalism, i.e., the classification of peoples. E. Said suggests that one of the particularities of 18th century orientalist writings was the increasing numbers of the categorisation of mankind according to their race, colour, and similar considerations(p. 119). Defoe's work bears traces of this writing in the assumptions and attitude Crusoe displays vis-a-vis those non-Europeans. These traces appear in the fact that he considers himself more superior in intelligence, courage, and religion.

However, the main image of the colonised in the novel is that of Friday. After the shipwreck, Robinson Crusoe spent many years living solitarily on the island. The discovery of the print of a man's naked foot was "like thunder…" (Defoe, 1994, p. 152). His world, which was built only around him in the centre, loses its order. He is terrorised, especially that the print of this man's foot seemed larger than his (p. 157). First, he reacts by making more defences. His cave becomes a castle, and he adopts a new set of cautionary measures. He starts constructing mentally the image of this 'other' man who is in the island without seeing him as "savages and cannibals" (p. 161), which reveals the prejudice Europeans have against non-European peoples.

Interestingly, Robinson Crusoe's thoughts changed from being the victim to a determination to get a savage into his possession (Defoe, 1994, p. 195). Thus, in the first occasion he realises his goal of capturing a 'savage'. The encounter with this savage (Friday, but not named yet), reveals the aforementioned 'servility' that seems to characterise non-Europeans as this savage kneels, and "and set my other foot upon his head…" (p. 202). These gestures are interpreted unilaterally to be an act of self-enslavement, "and made all the signs to me of subjection, servitude, and submission imaginable" (p. 202). For Crusoe, this behaviour is sufficient justification for taking benefit of Friday later on. In the same vein, the fact that Crusoe saved Friday from the other savages stands on the metaphorical level as the coloniser saving the colonised from his own barbarity and savagery.

Having thus legitimated the appropriation of this savage, Crusoe gives him a name, Friday. The fact of apparently choosing this random name reflects the little significance accorded to the colonised as a whole. Such an act was later echoed in later colonies, especially the French ones, where colonised people were given arbitrary humiliating names registered in the offices of 'l'état civil'. However, in the case of Crusoe, there arise another interesting analogy about the particularity of the name 'Friday'. The particular case of Algerians under the French colonisation could serve as a concrete example. The establishment of the 'l'état civil' in Algeria by the French colonisers in the late 19th century was conducted in the goals of integrating and assimilating Algerians to French culture and also in another organisational goal which are those of collecting taxes and acquiring the lands(OULD-ENNEBIA, 2009, p. 07). This process led in some way to the destruction of the social order in that it shattered the kind of tribal unity and ancestral memory Algerian society enjoyed, and overall, it accentuated the identitarian crisis of the Algerians after independence.

It is by drawing such analogies that the story of Crusoe comes to take its place as the genesis of colonial literary narrative. However, the act of naming Friday has other ramifications. By imposing on him this name, Friday is stripped of his identity, his past, religion, language…. The act of initiating him to the Western culture, speaking in a deformed way the European language, adopting awkwardly the European habits with the traces of his old culture persisting, he becomes a new breed, or more appropriately a hybrid, a creation of the colonial situation. The observation of Frantz Fanon (1986) in this respect that, "A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language" (p. 14), fits well in this context as it suggests that Friday came to a world where he possessed nothing. First, to the island, which Crusoe considers his property, and second to the western culture of Crusoe, from which he is clearly a stranger.

In the early time when Crusoe met Friday, Crusoe spoke of him as an object "I caused Friday" (Defoe, 1994, p. 204), "I set him" (p. 209), it is highly reminiscent of Fanon's (1963) words, "…the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms" (pp. 32-33). However, after some time, Friday attains a certain maturity and Crusoe delegates to him some of his tasks, he becomes his auxiliary. In this respect, Crusoe constantly praises Friday's dexterity with menial jobs that he was himself unable to perform so well (e.g., making a boat). However, he never fails to

draw attention to his extraordinary ability in executing acts of barbarity "and at one blow cut off his head as cleverly…" (Defoe, 1994, p. 200), or again in their fight against the cannibals when Friday "pursued the wretches with no weapons…" (p. 232). This demonstrates that Friday is more disposed to kill than the average European.

Overall, the image of Friday is that of a contented and grateful subject, and was the attitude of the Africans met on the shore. Again, this corresponds to the stereotype of the "good nigger", who must always correspond to the white man's expectations, to be docile and thus he is always hostage of this image (Fanon, 1986, p. 35). In the case of Friday, one might ask how cannot he be so since he was saved, fed, cloth, sheltered, instructed into Christianity, and taught the usage of new tools all thanks to the benefaction of this coloniser. Crusoe also describes his relationship to Friday as that of a father and son, which suggest a kind of immaturity on the part of the former. This itself leads to the moral urge for Europeans to provide 'care' and 'protection' for these native peoples who are weak and unable to live in a civilised way. It is from such images that the mode of "protectorate" was inspired (Memmi, 2003, p. 126), legitimating the colonial powers' intrusion in the affairs of distant peoples.

It seems legitimate to argue that Daniel Defoe is one of those who set the tradition for later works of representing the natives or the 'other' in derogatory terms. These images were among the implicit moral justifications of the act of colonisation as the "civilising mission". The link between what Crusoe does on the island with Friday, i.e., transforming him into a proto-Englishman and what Macaulay in 1835 proclaims in his famous speech on creating a new "class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect." (Macaulay) is unambiguous. The will of Europeans to impose a change on those peoples to make them European-like was one of the main goals of colonisation. This would normalise the idea of their inferiority and facilitate their subordination to the West.

4. Appropriation and Legitimation: Mystifying the Land

By the time *Robinson Crusoe* was published in 1719, English overseas exploration and settlements were in progress. The North American colonies and the West Indies were prosperous, accounts of travellers and adventurers relating the mysteries of foreign lands were common. The island motif was not a new literary device, Thomas More in *Utopia* (1516), and Shakespeare in *The Tempest* (1611) had already used it. In the context of *Robinson Crusoe* and in the light of this reading, the representation of

foreign lands generally and the island particularly serve to reinforce the stereotypical image of foreign lands as inhabited by natives as wastelands. Only a land inhabited and worked by an English becomes habitable.

When Robinson Crusoe escaped from the grip of the Moors, he sails south and discovers new territories, unknown to him. He does not venture to the mainland; he only watches from a distance and describes the desert seashore where "vast creatures…hideous and howling" (Defoe, 1994, p. 29/30). When one of these creatures attempted to approach the boat, he "fires at him". The image is that of a land inhabited predominantly by wild beasts, that if it is to be approached, it only should be approached by force. The ideas of danger and mystery surrounding these territories is exacerbated by such descriptions, which also helped fastened the image of a 'savage, wild land' to Africa. In the same current, E. Said (2003) argues that "The geographic boundaries accompany the social, ethnic, and cultural ones…"(p. 54); Africa was not only savage but it was the land of no civilisation, culture, or history. All of these notions existed only in Europe. In this consideration, the situation of the island is the same that of Africa.

The second instance where a foreign land is mentioned in the novel is Brazil, where Robinson Crusoe becomes a sugar planter. However, this was only a short interval in the long voyage of the restless Crusoe for he was on board again and this time he was bound for another ordeal as he was shipwrecked and cast on a deserted island. The possibilities that lie ahead for him are those of "perishing of hunger or being devoured by wild beasts" (Defoe, 1994, p. 50), reminding the reader again of the idea of a "savage inhabitable land". Slowly, he is accustomed to his new situation and starts a process of inhabiting the island. He first makes some voyages to the shipwreck where he recuperated some necessities, then he starts taking advantage of the available natural resources, building a habitation, discovering the contours of the island, simply he was building a small colony in the image of his motherland, England. In all his tasks of converting the land, he prefigures the 19th century colonisers 'pioneers' or more accurately in French "défricheur".

Drawing parallels again to concrete examples, one has to note that this process of 'discovery' and 'exploration' was not a feature of fictional works. many colonisation enterprises resorted later to this process of 'exploration'- an act of surveying a land that already belonged to some people- in the goal of redefining its ownership. "*The Scientific Exploration of Algeria During the Years 1840,1841, 1842, 1843, 1844, and 1845"* is a

work that illustrates one of those tendencies as it attempts to establish French knowledge of the country as the only valid knowledge, which would serve later to further the colonial enterprise.

Thus, Robinson Crusoe, equipped with the ideals of hard work and belief in reason, and the equally important modern tools, starts converting the island. First, he constructs what he calls "[his] fortress", where one should not miss the military connotation. Then he sets up a post upon which to mark the date and a journal in which to record the happenings and to leave as trace in case of his death. The island was no longer in prehistoric times; it was adjusted to the clock of European civilisation. He starts, as Fanon put it, "mak[ing] history" (Fanon, 1963, p. 39).

After living for some time as hunter-gatherer, Crusoe becomes a farmer in order to secure his food supply, a necessary step for the transition from one civilizational phase to another. This would enable him to pursue other tasks. A consequent step for farming the land is making hedges and enclosures (Defoe, 1994, p. 145). Afterwards, he surveyed the island and assessed the resources and the strategic places. He finds a spot to build his "country house", and this reflects the level of affluence he has now reached as his provisions are, according to him, not to be found even in Leadnhall market (p. 110).

The act of appropriation here lies in the fact that he starts shaping the island to the image of his motherland, and the use of a certain vocabulary usually employed to describe the English scenery, 'hedges, enclosures, country house…'enhances the sense that this island is an extension of England (Smit-Marais, 2011, p. 108). The fact that it was uninhabited before aides in the process of appropriation. Before fully converting the island, Crusoe described it as "the Island of Despair" (Defoe, 1994, p. 72), and the "unhappy island" (p. 99), where the environment is hostile with earthquakes and hurricanes, but after the toil and labour, it was a different place, it became, "my island" as he put it.

The thing that helped Crusoe tame the land and shaped the environment was of course the tools he brought from the shipwreck. The idea of applying his modern tools to control nature is in fact a celebration of the European man's technical advance and the decisive line between the civilised and uncivilised worlds. He has pistols, an axe, a hammer, and a carpenter's chest (Defoe, 1994, p. 54), all the necessaries for building and other similar tasks. However, and on a more metaphorical level, the fact of bringing all these gadgets and tools, Crusoe remains an intruder because he imposes an unnatural order on this land, which for long had existed without

any foreign intrusion. Crusoe remains an alien as Fanon put it, "In the colonies, the foreigner coming from another country imposed his rule by means of guns and machines. In defiance of his successful transplantation, in spite of his appropriation, the settler still remains a foreigner" (1963, p. 31).

5. CONCLUSION

The themes of savagery and civilisation run almost in parallel in the novel through various representations of man and space. Such contrasts could be said to have operated as subtle literary devices for legitimising the appropriation of the 'land' and the 'man' by European colonisers. And despite of its literary merit, the novel could be considered as one the works that established the negative image of non-Europeans and of projecting the enterprise of 'land grabbing' in a positive light.

Daniel Defoe's novel was one of the first to establish these norms by subtly representing people and land in 'a far from objective' manner. Authors of his brand often derided native cultures, and presupposed the absence of any previous history for those peoples and their lands, or even if it existed, it was not worthy to be in the ranks of European history. However, in the words of F. Fanon (1963), "No colonial system draws its legitimacy from the fact that the territories it dominates are culturally non-existent"(p. 223). And no literary works should be the means by which such injustices are perpetuated, or misleading views are propagated.

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