International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences
Vol-6, Issue-1; Jan-Feb, 2021

Journal Home Page Available: https://ijeab.com/
Journal DOI: 10.22161/ijels

“The Passage into Another State”: The Representation of the Colonial Space in *Moll Flanders* and *Colonel Jack*

Chandrima Das

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Durgapur Women’s College, Durgapur, West Bengal, India

Received: 27 Nov 2020; Received in revised form: 10 Jan 2021; Accepted: 05 Feb 2021; Available online: 28 Feb 2021
©2021 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Abstract**—*Throughout the course of the eighteenth century the penal culture of England evolved into more “modern” and recognizable forms. One of the most important moments of this evolution came in the form of the Transportation Act of 1718 which regularized the system of convict transportation from England to the convict colonies, especially to Virginia and Maryland. In this paper I propose to examine two of Daniel Defoe’s criminal narratives—both published in 1722-- Moll Flanders and Colonel Jack, which portray the colonial space of these settlements in great detail. In the course of the paper, I argue that Defoe’s presentation of the colonial space in these two texts is nuanced and complex, depicting it simultaneously as a place of opportunity and of punishment. The criminal subjects of Defoe’s text lose and gain power in the convict colonies and pardon is used as a political strategy to effectively retain power over criminal/colonial subjects. The colonial space in the form of the convict colonies fold within itself the paradoxical allurement as well as repulsion exercised by any colonial entity on the colonized. This paradoxical quality of this space exerts a narratorial pressure on the texts bifurcating them into two halves and making the protagonists undertake two journeys to Virginia.*
Keywords**—*Daniel Defoe, convict, colony, slave, servitude, pardon.***

I. INTRODUCTION

In Neil Gaiman’s 2008 novel, *The Graveyard Book*, the protagonist Nobody Owens is an orphan who is being brought up by ghosts in an abandoned graveyard. Nobody, or Bod, as he is familiarly known among his ghostly benefactors, generally gets along well with the other inhabitants of the graveyard. But one rainy morning, Bod gets punched in the ear by Thackery Porringer, the fourteen-year-old ghost of an eighteenth-century apprentice. Bod’s fault has been his “borrowing” of the only book Porringer had ever possessed; the book that he had been buried with on the request of his mother. The book which turns out to be so special to Porringer that causes a breach between the two boys is none other than Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*.

Gaiman’s incorporation of this reference in his novel is a contemporary tribute to the continuous success of *Robinson Crusoe*. This early eighteenth-century narrative of a shipwrecked sailor surviving in an island for twenty-eight years has intrigued generations of readers and commentators as a quasi-mythical parable of English colonial enterprise. Colonialism, as we know by now, was one of the numerous concerns that Defoe repeatedly raised in his fictional and journalistic writings, both before, and after the publication of *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719.In the three years after the publication of *Crusoe*, Defoe published three important novels which were at least partially set in various European colonies— *Captain Singleton* in 1720, and *Moll Flanders* and *Colonel Jack*, both in 1722. In the two latter novels, the colonial space that Defoe presents in great details is the North American colony of Virginia. In this article, I am going to argue that Defoe’s representation of this space in these two novels is fraught with ambiguities and is characterized by a duality that stems from the unique position that Virginia held in the context of the eighteenth-century penal system. In other words, the fact that Virginia and neighbouring Maryland, were not only settler colonies, but very specifically, convict colonies, accounts for the ambivalence in Defoe’s portrayal of this space.

Before going into a detailed analysis of the texts however, we need to take a very brief look into the English penal system as it was in the eighteenth century. During the

period referred to as the "long eighteenth century", i.e from 1688 to 1815, English laws earned for itself the disparaging epithet "The Bloody Code". The epithet owed its origin to the fact that in this period an inordinately high number of crimes were punishable by death under the English Common Laws. With the growing prosperity of the nation, the quantum of punishment against crimes, especially crimes related to the destruction or stealing of property, became gradually higher. By the end of the period, as many as 225 offences were punishable by death (Mclynn, xi) However, as historians have often pointed out, the theoretical harshness of the Bloody Code did not necessarily translate into reality.

The majority of the criminals sentenced to be hanged could escape the gallows by having a death sentence transmuted into one of transportation to the colonies. The Transportation Act of 1718 became a watershed moment in this context. This Act gave institutional stamp on a practice which had been in use since the sixteenth century. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth, vagabonds beggars and masterless men could be exiled overseas. The Jacobean Privy Council's proclamation made in 1614 clearly and unequivocally draws a connection between transportation and colonial profit by stating that—

> his Majesty, both out of his gracious clemency, as also for divers weighty considerations, could wish they [the felons receiving capital punishment] might be rather corrected than destroyed, and that in their punishments some of them might yield a profitable service to the commonwealth in parts abroad where it shall be found fit to employ them (Privy Council,1614)

Throughout the seventeenth century, transportation to the English holdings overseas continued in a sporadic manner. Virginia, however, was not the only destination of the convicts, they were shipped to Jamaica and Barbados as well. Transportation was offered either as a reprieve (a suspension of the death sentence, not a rescindment), or, from the mid-seventeenth century onwards, as a form of "conditional pardon". With the passing of the Transportation Act in 1718, transportation began to be used as a direct sentence; as well as a conditional pardon. The changing status of transportation in the legal discourse through the – seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is aptly summarized by Cynthia Herrup — "In the course of these changes, transportation shifted administratively from possibility to occasional option to routine practice. Legally, it morphed from a concession to planters to a mitigation promoted as a boon for convicts into a declared punishment for the public good" (Herrup, 122). Transportation, by the time Defoe wrote *Moll Flanders* and *Colonel Jack* could be paradoxically perceived as both a form of punishment, and a form of pardon.

This duality at the heart of the system of transportation permeate Defoe's depiction of the convict colony in the two novels under discussion. The simultaneous allurement and repulsion exercised by the colonial site on the psyche of the colonizer has often been used as a literary trope. Defoe uses it to full effect in *Captain Singleton* where Africa is depicted as a land of immense riches as well as one inflicting tremendous physical hardship; but for Bob Singleton and his desperate crew, the Africa that they trek through is an unknown and hostile terrain, where more threat is posed by wild animals than by human beings. The Virginia of Moll and Jack, on the other hand, has challenges of a different kind to offer. In a colonial settlement, which has been under the management of the British since 1607, it is not unfamiliarity, but familiarity with their unsavoury pasts that they have to contend with, a past that has been marred by crime and repeated conflicts with the law. Interestingly enough, both Moll and Jack, undertake journeys to Virginia not once, but twice in their lives. In each case, one of the journeys is voluntary; the other is forced. The two journeys become what Srinivas Aravamudan has described as a kind of "colonial double circuit from London to Virginia and back again, twice." (58) The two journeys foreground the dual character of the colonial space all the more clearly. Moll first undertakes a voyage to Virginia in the company of her third husband, a prosperous planter with a thriving business in that part of the world. Her life in the colony seems to be happy enough until the time she discovers, from the conversation of her mother-in law, that she has inadvertently married her own half-brother, and her mother-in -law, is also her mother who had given birth to her in Newgate prison before being transported to Virginia herself. Significantly enough, this ghastly revelation of the past comes in the course of a conversation where Moll's mother/mother-in-law had been waxing eloquent about the possibility of redemption and prosperity that Virginia holds for the transported convict— "Hence Child, says she, many a Newgate Bird becomes a great Man, and we have, continued she, several Justices of the Peace Officers of the Train Bands, and Magistrates of the Towns they live in, that have been burnt in the Hand" (68). A little later, she points out that a life in Virginia is immensely preferable over one as a condemned prisoner in Newgate. She cites her own case as an illustration of the truth of these pronouncements—

> Then she went on to tell me how she very luckily fell into a good Family, where behaving herself well, and her Mistress dying, her Master married her...and that by her Diligence and good Management after her Husband's Death, She had

> improv'd the Plantations to such a degree as they then were, so that most of the Estate was of her getting, not her Husband's... (70)

The moral of the story is clear, and would later be borne out by Moll's own case, who would also metamorphose from a "Newgate Bird" to a prosperous planter some thirty years later; but the details of the story reveal that Moll's husband is her own half-brother. Till now, Moll's marriages have survived lo a great extent on the strength of her ability to successfully suppress her past. In case of her first marriage with the younger brother of the Colchester household where she grew up as a maid, could take place only by her concealment of the fact that she had been the mistress of the older brother. Her present marriage with her half-brother is based on the false report spread by her that she was a widow of great fortune, while in reality she had little to survive on and technically, was still married to her second husband, the linen draper. Moll's foray into Virginia should have enabled her to make a clear breach from her past, but instead, it not only rakes up the secret of her birth but also becomes the stage for the enactment of a sin she had earlier been guilty of only in the mind. While she was married to her first husband, Moll could never master her desire for her brother-in-law, so much so that she declared— "I committed Adultery and Incest with him every Day in my Desires, which without doubt, was as effectually criminal in the nature of the guilt, as if I had actually done it." (47) The imagined incest tums itself into a dreaded reality in Virginia.

The colonial space, curiously enough, also deprives Moll of her autonomy over her fate. While in London, Moll had been able to manipulate the marriage market in her favour, she had also been able to make her present husband promise that whether to emigrate to the colony or not, would be a matter of her choice and she would never be forced to do so. This autonomy is suspended while she finds herself in Virginia. Both unable, and unwilling to reveal the truth of her birth to her husband/brother, she merely insists on her demand to return to England. As a consequence, she is thought to be insane, threatened with incarceration and apprehends a complete dissolution of her selfhood in the face of colonial laws. She realises all too clearly that after the revelation of the truth, if her husband decides to take recourse to — "the Advantage the Law would give him, he might put me away with Disdain, and leave me to Sue for the little Portion that I had, and perhaps waste it all in the Suit, and then be a Beggar; the Children would be ruined too, having no legal Claim to any of his Effects."(73) She therefore, is forced to reveal the truth and accept the past that she had attempted so long to disown. It is only after this act of reclaiming the past that Moll is able to extricate herself from this ethical as well as legal difficulty and is allowed to come back to England.

Ironically, Moll's second journey to Virginia, and this time really as a Newgate Bird who has been respited of a death sentence and is transported proves to be a successful one. Her long and profitable career as a thief is terminated when she is finally caught, sent to Newgate, and sentenced to death. Moll's life has come full circle as she finds herself in the place where she had been born. Her subsequent repentance and submission to her fate is likened to a new birth, dissolution of the "hardness" of her soul. In prison, she is reunited with her fourth and husband Jemmy, also under the sentence of death. Both Moll and Jemmy manage to commute their sentences of hanging to one of transportation and embark upon, with much reluctance on the part of Jemmy, a journey to Virginia as indentured labourers. Once on shore, Moll's ill-begotten wealth, the booty of her thieving career, manage to buy for both of them a certificate of discharge and also a moderate plantation into the bargain.

If Moll's misfortune in the first journey to Virginia has been the result of her inability to separate her past from her present; in her second one she manages with dexterity to keep the two apart. She finds that her third husband is still alive, though almost blind and senile; discovers herself to her son Humphrey by this husband without revealing the fact that she is now accompanied by another man; takes possession of the estate her mother had left for her and fulfils the destiny that had once been painted in such glowing terms by her mother. After the death of the husband/brother she is also free town her marriage to Jemmy and retain the affection of her son. The stable family unit that she had tried to form with little success is finally formed in the very place where she had once suffered the greatest loss on this account. A prosperous and responsible son from a former marriage and a Gentleman husband that she cares for constitute the unit that suits Moll the best.

Colonel Jack, an unacknowledged illegitimate child like Moll, and a boy driven to the world of crime from his childhood, also makes two long sojourns in Virginia. Unlike Moll however, Jack's enforced voyage comes first. He is kidnapped to Virginia and sold as an indentured labourer by the deceitful master of a ship that he had boarded under the impression that he is going to London. Jack's plight is in effect a metaphorical punishment for the crimes he had repeatedly committed in his youth. The effects of Moll's real punishment were skilfully circumvented by her access to ready money. Jack unfortunately, could not bring his money on board, and could only produce a bill amounting to 94 pounds left in the hands of a clerk in London as a capital to be realized at the right moment. Though he has been a criminal in England,

ISSN: 2456-7620
https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijels.61.58

Jack effectively conceals and falsifies his past by virtue of the fact that that he was not sent over to the colonies as a convict. Virginia becomes the stage for the refashioning of his personality as he continuously posits himself against other convicted transportees, and more significantly, against the Negro slaves owned by his master. He is extremely fortunate in finding his master both benevolent and just, and is quickly raised from the status of a plantation labourer to that of an overseer.

Once Jack had been made an overseer, he finds himself unable to "correct" his labourers from a sense of affinity with them— "I, who was but Yesterday a Servant or Slave like them, and under the Authority of the same Lash, should lift up my Hand to the Cruel Work, which was my Terror the Day before: This I say, I could not do:" (127). Jack's inability to exercise authority soon makes him a butt of ridicule to the Negroes, "and one of them had the Impudence to say behind my Back, that if he had the Whipping of me, he would show me better how to Whip a Negro" (128). The resultant disorder could only be rectified if Jack suppresses his empathy with the Slaves/servants. This he manages to do by staging a mock theatre of punishment where he appropriates the role of the master and metaphorically puts the slave in his place. One of the slaves in the plantation called Mouchat was to be whipped for some minor misdemeanour. Jack has him tied by the thumbs for correction and leads him to expect a bout of violent whipping. After making the necessary impression of the harshness of the imminent punishment on Mouchat, Jack offers to appeal on his behalf to the "Great Master" that is, the owner of the plantation. Jack asks him pointedly — "And what will you say, Or do, said I, if I should prevail with the Great master to Pardon your I have a mind to go and see if I can beg for you: He told me he would lye down, let me kill him, me will, says he, run go, fetch, bring for you as long as me live" (137). Jack accordingly, pretends to go to the Great Master to ask for forgiveness, comes back and "pardons" Mouchat. His reaction is exactly what Jack had intended— "When the Fellow was let loose, he came to me, and kneel'd down to me, and took hold of my Legs and of my feet, and laid his head upon the Ground; and Sob'd, and Cry'd. Like Child that has been Corrected, but could not speak for his life; and thus he continu'd a long time." (140)

This strategy, of tempering Justice with mercy becomes the most effective tool of control over the workforce in the Great Master's plantation, and later in his own. Jack clearly realises that cleverly manipulated show of mercy makes more grateful and obedient slaves. However, mercy applied without the prior threat of punishment tends to undermine the authority of the white ruling classes. Interestingly, when Crusoe swims ashore after the shipwreck that claimed the lives of all his fellow sailors, he expresses his sense of gratitude thus –

> I...began to look up and thank God that my life was sav'd in a Case wherein there was some Minutes before scarce any room to hope. I believe it is impossible to Express... what the Extasies and Transports of the soul are, when is so sav'd, as I may say, out of the very Grave and I do not wonder now at that Custom…that malefactor who has the halter about his neck, is tyed up, and just going to that be turned off, and has a reprieve brought to him:...I do not wonder that they bring a Surgeon with it, to let him Blood that very moment they tell him of it... (35)

Crusoe ascribes the power to save a soul from the verge of death to God, Moll had had a last-minute reprieve brought to her from the legal establishment; Jack on the other hand, appropriates the role of both God and Law in meting out "mercy". Jack becomes to Mouchat what God had been to Crusoe and the Law to Moll, only with the difference that Jack's mercy enforces a more effective form of subordination.

These series of parallels lays bare the nature of power exercised in the colonial space. Jack's return to Virginia, after a life of ramble in Europe, is not as fortunate as first visit. Like Moll, he is reunited with one of his spouses, his first wife, in his own plantation when he finds her as a transported labourer. But his past catches up with him in a way he had not foreseen. While in England, Jack had briefly participated in the Jacobite rebellion of 1715, but had managed to escape before the rebels were caught. Some of his fellow rebels are transported as political prisoners to Virginia and are bought by his neighbouring planters. Jack spends his life under the continuous threat of discovery and is finally forced to remove himself from the plantation. His apprehensions are laid to rest only after he manages to obtain for himself a general pardon from King George. As Mouchat had once done, now it is Jack's turn to praise the use of clemency by the King—

> …for Gratitude is a debt that never ceases while the benefit received remains, and if my Prince has given me my Life, I can never pay the debt fully, unless such a Circumstance as this Should happen, that the Prince's Life should be in my Power, and I as generously preserved it…(276)

As with Crusoe and Moll—and unlike the less fortunate slave —the pardon that Jack receives paves the way for his ultimate freedom. Jack can fully master his circumstances by subordinating himself to the clemency of the King, and this mastery is achieved through servitude and debasement.

II. CONCLUSION

Moll and Jack, in the course of their chequered careers encounter various forms of authority, they are able to both exercise their authority and are undermined by that of others in Virginia. In the course of their adventures in Virginia, they bear out the accuracy of Miche Foucault's observation about the eighteenth century as "a time when, in Europe and in the United States, the entire economy of punishment was redistributed" (7). The Virginia that they experience is like Crusoe's "Island of Despair" --a place of servitude as well as mastery, of punishment and of pardon, Defoe's presentation of the convict colony is thus more nuanced and complex than we ordinarily perceive it to be.

REFERENCES

[1] *Acts of the Privy Council of England*. Colonial Series, Vol-I. Hereford: Wyman & Sons,1908.

[2] Aravamudan, Srinivas. "Defoe, Commerce and Empire". *The Cambridge Companion to Daniel Defoe*. Edited by John Richetti, Cambridge UP, 2008.

[3] Defoe, Daniel. *Robinson Crusoe.* WW Norton & Co., 2001.

[4] --- *Moll Flanders.* WW Norton & Co., 2003.

[5] --- *The History and Remarkable Life of the Truly Honourable COL. Jacque, Commonly Call'd Col. Jack*. Oxford UP, 1965.

[6] Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage, 1995.

[7] Gaiman, Neil. *The Graveyard Book.* Bloomsbury, 2008.

[8] Herrup, Cynthia. "Punishing Pardon: Some Thoughts on the Origins of Penal Transportation". *Penal practice and Culture, 1500-1900: Punishing the English.* Edited by Simon Devereaux and Paul Griffiths. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

[9] Mclynn, Frank.*Crime and Punishment in Eighteenth Century England*. Routledge, 1989.

ISSN: 2456-7620
https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijels.61.58